The Mischief Maker

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THE MISCHIEF-MAKER.

BY

LESLIE KEITH,

Author of
"The Indian Uncle," "'Lisbeth," "The Chilcotes," etc.

In Two Volumes.
Vol. I.

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THE MISCHIEF-MAKER.

CHAPTER I.

"I WONDER at you, John Gillespie! You're surprised at his success, and yet it's to you he's beholden for it."

Everybody gazed at old Mrs. Laidlaw, who is accustomed to dominate any society in which she happens to find herself; each, no doubt, looked the surprise he felt, though upon no countenance was it so plainly depicted as upon that of the minister himself—the Rev. Dr. Gillespie, of the orthodox kirk—portly, affable, with a well-filled waistcoat and a twinkling eye. The twinkle died away as he

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arched his fine brows, and pursed his handsome lips.

"I—my dear madam?" he remonstrated mildly; "I really fear I must be so rude as to contradict you. I have not exchanged so much as a word with the young man; for though I did call, as in duty bound, to extend him the right hand of fellowship"—he spread out his plump white fingers, as if to prove their readiness to embrace the stranger's—"I was informed that he was out. At a case, I believe."

Charlie Nairn sniggered, and the others smiled. Then some one said—

"It is quite well known that he hadn't a single patient for a year after he settled here. They say he was nearly starved out."

"And, blessed as I am with a singularly robust constitution," the doctor went on after an impressive pause, which imposed silence, just as if he were in the pulpit, "I have had no occasion to require his professional services. For the matter of that"—he glanced at Charlie, who immediately blushed up to

the roots of his red hair—"we have an excellent practitioner in Shawbridge. Therefore, my dear friend, I scarcely perceive the logic of your argument."

"Hoot-toot! logic here or logic there, you've answered your own question, minister." She grasped the arms of her easy-chair, one of very ample dimensions, and, looking round, fixed the company with her dull black eyes. "When I was young—that's not yesterday—the men that were foremost with the women were the men that could fight and hold their own. A lass thought the more of her sweetheart if he could use his elbows to get to the front, even if he had to push a neighbour in the dirt to clear his road. But times have changed, boldness has gone out of fashion; it's your martyr that's master now. Persecute a man, and the women are ready to set him up for a saint with a halo round his pow. And that's just what you've done, doctor, you and the lave of you. You've turned your backs on the lad; you've passed him by on the other side; you've sent for that old gowk, Nairn—

ay, Charlie, my man, I see you're there; but your uncle knows fine what I think of him. Many's the time I've said to him—'When I'm weary of living and ready to die, Tom Nairn, you may come chapping at my door, with your doctor's long face and your bit bag of drugs, but no' a day sooner.' And it's thanks to your good constitution, John Gillespie, and not to your common sense, you're here this day, for you've tempted Providence by neglecting a lad of parts that Shawbridge should have been proud to welcome. And now that he's got his foot in at the Castle, and all the women—and your ain lass the first—are ready to lie down and let him tread upon them, it's your day to sing small."

Why Mrs. Laidlaw singled out the minister as the object of her attack was a mystery no one sought to solve. In matters such as these she was a law to herself. But all knew that since it pleased her to espouse the cause of young Dr. Sutherland, his battle was as good as won. She was self-appointed dictator, and ruled by right of being in a sense the foundress

of Shawbridge. Fifty and more years before, when, as a well-dowered bride from Glasgow, Janet Stewart had settled in her husband's old home on what was then a green haugh embraced by a silver river, she had been quick to perceive the capabilities of the place. Her money and her energy went to the building of the first tall chimney that with its reek defiled the fair face of heaven; and Laidlaw's mill laid the foundation of Shawbridge's prosperity. The mansion still remains, though the mill has been handsomely rebuilt, but not a vestige of the garden that once made a silence round it. It is jostled on either side by buildings of a meaner type, the scamped work of to-day's haste, and stands out, a voiceless protest against the vandalism that has converted a peaceful village into a hideous, insanitary, overcrowded manufacturing town. In less than three generations the evil has been wrought; the kingdom of the curlew and the sheep is loud with the rattle of looms; the encircling hills, which seem to withdraw their skirts in disdain of all this human bustle,

are dotted with the princely villas of men who have made it their mission to clothe half the world, and are proud of it. From the inky and unsavoury Shaw the fish have fled—the angler no longer haunts its banks.

But what matter? Mrs. Laidlaw is the richest person in a rich community, and it is the part of policy to keep on her good side. Besides, Bridge House is the very hub of Shawbridge. The town traffic flows by its doors; history makes itself before your eyes as you stand at the big bay window of this informal club. It is the debating-ground of the town quality; the lecture-hall, where an uncrowned queen keeps her subjects in order.

"So it is I who am the scapegoat!" said the minister, as he hooked his arm within that of Horace Little. He chuckled softly, in not ungratified amusement. The minister, as has been said, is a fine figure of a man; 'tis whispered that he smiles benignantly on the uninstructed tourist, who mistakes him for a species of presbyterian bishop, and

perhaps he likes to walk with Horace Little, to whom Nature has been ungenerous in her dealings.

"It was your turn to-day, and you got it pretty hot, there's no denying. But you see, doctor"—the banker looked before him with an unmoved face—"your sermon, yesterday, was—well, perhaps—just a little—eh?"

"Eh!" echoed Dr. Gillespie, sharply. "So the sermon was amiss, was it?" Then the twinkle came into his eye. "That's because Nancy wasn't there to look after me."

"And you forgot, naturally, to turn the pile. Is Miss Nancy still nursing poor old Cunningham?"

"She still deprives me of her company for his."

"He gets no better?"

"He doesn't die."

"And the young doctor is in attendance?"

"Exactly," said Dr. Gillespie. "The young doctor—the young man whose career I am supposed to have blighted—is in attendance.

You have no daughter, Little; if you had, she would be as other women are."

"She would not be half so good as Miss Nancy," said the banker, gallantly.

The minister shook his head in polite dissent.

"She's well enough, the lassie," he said; and though his heart might have been bursting with pride, his Scotch reticence would not have let him say more. "But you don't understand women, Little. How should you—a mere onlooker at the drama of marriage? Nancy is a good girl—a good daughter as daughters go—but it's a camsteerie sex; hold the reins as you will, it takes the bit between its teeth."

"Talking of women," said the banker, seeing his friend's good-nature was a little ruffled, "did you ever hear the story of Mrs. Laidlaw's mother? It was Jamieson who used to tell it—your predecessor here. It seems that Mrs. Stewart came to visit her daughter, and was seized, while here, with illness. The doctor shook his head,

prognosticating the worst, and Jamieson was sent for—to administer those consolations that are your privilege. Shown into the patient's room, he found her sitting up in bed in full flow of talk. He drew Laidlaw aside and whispered, 'Isn't there some mistake?—she's talking so vigorously.' 'Oh, my dear fellow,' said Laidlaw—you remember the meek, depressed bit of a creature he was?—'don't go by that. *Her* mother died in the middle of a sentence.'"

The minister laughed.

"Our good friend will take care that the sentence is complete," he said. "We shall all get our paiks. Yours will be the hand held out for the tawse, to-morrow, Little."

"Then I hope I shall bear up under the punishment as bravely as you." The banker spoke in mock seriousness.

The two shook hands at the latter's door. The twinkle came back to the minister's eye as he turned away. He played again with the thought that amused him.

"And yet it is I—I who have thwarted a

fellow-creature in his efforts to live! I who have played the part of persecutor! She talked of the halo of martyrdom, I remember. I wonder if Nancy has discovered that halo?"

He was not too deeply absorbed in his reflections to be keenly observant of all that passed around him. It was the hour for the mills to "scale," and Shaw Street was flooded with a rough crowd of lads, and girls wearing white aprons and little woollen shawls upon their heads. The girls linked arms, making conquest of the entire pavement, and those who had business in the street concerned themselves to take the middle of the road. If you live in a manufacturing centre, you soon learn to give way to might. The minister, however, kept blandly on his course; he smiled indulgently on the jostling crew, and his salutations were answered by nods of varying curtness. The doctor was like the steeple of his own kirk—a landmark to be respected. The same young women—or the better-disposed of them at least—who now wore daidlies and clothed their rough heads

in tartan, appeared in the front gallery on Sundays in the very best silks and feathers which Stewart, the draper in the High Street, could produce. The minister did not rebuke this finery, nor did he suggest that broken boots and gay ribbons were ill met. Had he not a daughter of his own? So they let him have his share of the pavement—the only privileged man, and unlinked their arms that he might pass. Others fared less well. With the tail of his eye the minister saw Charlie Nairn dive into Mackie, the chemist's, as the horde advanced. Charlie, recently taken on as "creeshie" at Laidlaw's Mill, was their legitimate butt: Mrs. Mellison, too, hurrying home from a round of calls, and uncomfortably conscious of wearing her best, was the subject of much outspoken criticism and comment. Her blushes roused the doctor's sympathy as he raised his hat, and he was tempted to turn and escort her home. A pity to be so sensitive—these rough children of Nature meant no harm. For himself, he basked in an atmosphere of general good-will. As he

turned out of Shaw Street into Church Walk, leaving the noisy band behind him, his steps became slower, his fine figure seemed to bulk larger. He was in his own domain. Over the low wall he could see the crowding grave-stones — so near to the life and youth of Shaw Street, and yet wrapped in an eternal loneliness.

How many of his own flock had he followed there since, twenty years before, he had laid his own young wife in the corner under the weeping willow by the further wall! There was a time when he had found himself unable to pass the spot without lingering to pluck a weed from the grass-sown mound, or train a tendril of the encircling ivy; he did not pause now, and he left the guardianship of the grave to Nancy. But he still thought of the first Nancy, and there were times when he took a kind of solemn pleasure in his own constancy. It had been such a certainty in men's mouths that he would marry again. His eye travelled to the church, and his thoughts to the many couples he had united there, and

the little ones he had baptized. The barn-like building—harled afresh each spring, with a stumpy uplifted finger pointing skywards, was as he had found it, with bulging galleries, narrow window-slits, and high-walled pews. His aspirations did not lie in the way of restoration; an "anti-scrape" society, had such existed in Shawbridge, would have found him a zealous member. A new church might have demanded new sermons.

The manse was a few minutes' walk from the church, and well away from the saddening influence of the churchyard. A plain, substantial house, with comfort beaming from its every eye. The sparkle of firelight making red gleams among the laurel bushes, gladdened his heart, for now that the sun had dipped westward, the spring day was raw and cold.

"Is my daughter at home?" he asked, as Sarah, the housemaid, ran to open the door in anticipation of his latch-key.

"No, sir, not yet."

"Ah!" said the minister, gravely, as he hung up his hat.

"Miss Nancy was in at four o'clock, and she said, as Mr. Cunningham was not quite so well, she might be late. And please, sir, I've taken the tea into the study, and the kettle's singing."

He thanked her graciously as he turned into the comfortable room. Sarah knew and respected all her master's little weaknesses. It was one of them to brew his own tea. She also took pride in keeping bright the little silver skillet in which he sometimes warmed a posset when Nancy had gone to bed. If Nancy remonstrated, and insisted on ministering to him herself, he would tell her with a quite genuine sigh that when she was a child he had been a lonely man, and had fallen into bachelor ways.

"And, since you will leave me before long, isn't it a pity you should insist on my unlearning them, my dear?"

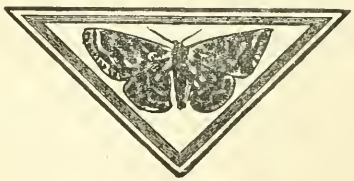
Nancy would sometimes declare that there was nothing less likely in the world than that she should leave him; but one knows what a girl means by such vehemence. It

is all very natural and right and pretty until her hour strikes, and then it is no longer papa to whom she vows eternal devotion. There was certainly no immediate suitor in view, and since Nancy had declined the hand of young George Black, Shawbridge, instructed by Mrs. Laidlaw, had pronounced the girl proud and particular. But young men will not be deterred by any old woman from admiring a handsome lass; and in the meantime Dr. Gillespie continued to "infuse" his own tea, and concoct those little warm drinks that sweetly woo sleep.

As he sat down in his capacious easy-chair —it was considerably more worn than the sad-hued theological books on the shelves— and measured the spoonsful from the silver caddy, his thoughts reverted to the stranger whom Mrs. Laidlaw had insisted on placing in the calendar of the persecuted.

Certainly no one looked less like saint or martyr than the broad-browed, vigorous, black-haired young gentleman, who came soliciting Shawbridge's suffrages, and seemed

determined to secure them by force if necessary. The *rôle* had been better filled by the sickly looking person—companion or patient—who was said to share his home. Still, women see with other eyes than men; and was it possible that Nancy, too, had had a glimpse of that halo?



CHAPTER II.

THIS was the position of affairs when we —Sutherland and I—had been settled for a year or more in Shawbridge. Perhaps it was our own "blame," as they say in these parts, that we were both isolated and ignored. We came as strangers, without introductions, and indeed, with what the medical men already established there were pleased to consider hostile intentions on Sutherland's part. They resented his trespass on ground already pretty thickly covered. He smacked of foreign schools and new science; he was an offence to their older-fashioned methods, their haphazard kill or cure ventures.

For a long time Sutherland did not understand that he was not wanted; when it was

forced upon him he straightened his broad shoulders and laughed.

"They'll want me yet," he said.

Nobody was considerate enough to tell us that the road to social success lay through Mrs. Laidlaw's front parlour; but, if we had been told, it would have been without avail, for Sutherland's back is of the cast-iron order, made without a hinge; and as for me, ill-health has always permitted me the privileges and consolations of a bachelor, to whom a lady's drawing-room is a *terra incognita*.

It may be as well to say here that I, Henry Fowler, have no part or lot in this chronicle beyond being Sutherland's friend. I drifted into his life when it was immeasurably to my benefit to have his companionship, and somehow—to his credit rather than to mine—we have remained comrades ever since. In one particular our lots are similar: we are both singularly friendless and relationless, but while he—the bold David—was born to conquer his world, a sickly constitution turned me early into an idler without Jonathan's alleviations to

support the situation. Perhaps the modest competence which just serves to keep me, has been, as Sutherland puts it, my curse—a greater ban to progress than a feeble habit of body, but it has always seemed to me enough to look on while he works. His vitality saps mine.

I was a small boy when Mrs. Sutherland consented, at the request of my guardians, to take charge of me, and for years we three drifted about England, Scotland, and the Continent, chiefly in search of sunshine for her. She was the widow of an officer who fell in the Indian Mutiny, she herself escaping in a boat by night down the Ganges with her infant son. Her nerves never recovered that terrible experience, but her pension, and a little annuity she had besides, enabled her to carry out her whim for travel. She was a curiously impulsive person who never paused to revise her judgments : her prejudices and fears were easily aroused and quickly acted on, and we were therefore quite accustomed to strike camp and take the road at a moment's notice.

Archie and I picked up a desultory education as best we could. He learned what he cared to learn very easily; what he didn't choose to acquire he left alone, his mother never interfering. As for me, I have always loved a book, and was never so pleased as when I could escape the discipline and routine of school life, and browse unhindered in pasturage of my own selecting. We made few acquaintances save those rolling stones of travel, as easily thrown aside as acquired, since we stayed nowhere long enough to strike root; but I desired no other friend than Archie. Friendship is less important to him: he is enough for himself.

His self-reliance was, I think, fostered by the vagrant life we led; it was so early necessary for him to think and act independently. I have often noticed that his curiously one-sided judgment of women was based upon his knowledge of his mother's character. That most women are illogical is probably true, but Sutherland would have it that they were nothing but a bundle of impulses and emotions,

scarcely admitting that they had minds, any more than canary birds. For all that, he was an excellent son, patient and good-humoured, even to the packing and unpacking of the innumerable overflowing boxes and bundles, novels and work-bags, we dragged about on our travels, and the carrying out, as well as he knew how, of her changing caprices. She was untidy, unmethodical, and helpless, and in the intervals between the departure of one maid and the arrival of another—she never could keep a servant—he became as neat-handed and useful as a daughter.

She died when he was twenty, and I some two years more. Her illness was lingering, and she fretted at the confinement; we were then living at a châlet in Switzerland, where she had fancied the air a month or two earlier; she now insisted that if she could but be taken to Bournemouth she would certainly recover. But her removal was out of the question, and she grew in time to accept her fate.

We were both in the bare sunny salon

—converted into the sick-room—one spring evening; but Archie, who had been on duty at her bedside the previous night, had fallen asleep. She lay looking at him in silence; perhaps he reminded her of her husband; certainly I have never been able to trace in him any look of his mother. He was as tall then as he is now, though not so broad-shouldered, and looked very big, huddled uneasily in the springless easy-chair. His black hair fell in a heavy lock over his forehead, which bulges over the eyebrows; his mouth was close set, his chin square, and even in sleep his head was tossed back, exposing the firm round throat. To me, he looked more stern and self-reliant than usual, since his eyes were veiled—there is a kindly tolerance in their dark-blue depths that redeems his face—but the gaze of the dying may see deeper than that of the living; women have fine intuitions which escape us, let Archie mock as he will; how else, while I was enviously admiring his strength, should his mother have perceived the seed

of weakness in him, unguessed by me? Was it by right of the long dormant motherhood in her—awakened at last—she read him so well?

She beckoned me to her.

"You will stay with him?" she whispered.

"If he will let me. So long as he tolerates me."

"That will be always; he has immense patience with weakness," she said, with unflattering candour. "You may help him—repay him."

"How?"

"He is strong; but he has one defenceless spot. He thinks he despises women, but one day he will fancy himself in love, and he will make a mistake—men of his type always do. Make your friendship of so much value to him that he will choose between it and love—choose *you*. He will neither be happy himself, nor make the woman happy whom he marries."

She asked no pledge of me, and better so, for the right answer would have been hard

to give. My faithfulness to him she might well take for granted; but to stand between him and love, even mistaken love——

She died in her son's arms the next day, seven years ago this very month; and, so far, her predictions have remained unfulfilled; not a petticoat has hazarded our peace.

The whole of her income, except a sum of about £2500, died with Mrs. Sutherland, but Archie's plans were all matured. He had long ago made up his mind that he would be a doctor, and the time had now come. He was his own master, owning allegiance to no one. Of his mother's few relations he knew nothing—I have always suspected that she was not proud of them. On his father's side, there were uncles and cousins—people of some social standing and importance—but we had never met any of them, except one, whose overtures Mrs. Sutherland discouraged, for he was admittedly the black sheep of the family. Archie and I had a sneaking liking for this reprobate—Colonel Tom Carnegie—but it

occurred to neither of us to ask his advice at this epoch. Indeed, it is not Sutherland's way to seek advice of anybody.

"I mean to use this money to fit myself as well as I can, theoretically, for the profession," he said; "the practice can take care of itself. We'll go to Edinburgh. One ought to be patriotic—and so long as you can poke your nose inside a book, you'll be happy anywhere. We'll get an introduction to the Advocate's Library—a perfect dungeon of learning, I'm told—and you can burrow there to your heart's content."

So to the proud capital of the North we went, and thereafter, when Archie had matriculated, for a long year or more, to Paris, and for another to Vienna. Our way of living was simple to the verge of austerity, and our joint income sufficed.

When Sutherland considered himself sufficiently equipped, we turned our faces homewards again, taking a run through Germany on our way to have a look at the hospitals there. How we finally came to

fix on Shawbridge as the scene of his practice it would take too long to tell. I was for a larger, more central place, but Archie had his answer ready. Shawbridge was yearly adding to its size and importance ; better begin in a progressive place, where one could advance with the tide, than be stranded in an older civilization.

We spent a couple of nights in the Angler's Arms. The landlord, who took us for south-country tourists, offered us a day's fishing in the Lochy—a tributary of the Shaw, not then poisoned by the refuse from the mills.

"You go," said Sutherland, who usually settled my plans as well as his own. "It isn't incumbent on you to catch anything. You can buy a creelful on your way through the town. All you want is leave to moon about with a book bulging each pocket."

"And what may you intend to do with yourself, since I'm conveniently disposed of ?"

"Take a look round to see how the land lies, and interview the agents."

He was well pleased, in his cool, calm way,

when we met in the evening and sat down to the fish with which I was fortunate enough to save our reputation in the landlord's eyes; but he said little till we were alone—then it all came out.

"I've seen the right thing—a corner house—no one else within a quarter of a mile. It's at the junction of South Place—eligible residential quarter, I've caught the house-agent's lingo, you see—and Hill Street—shops of the better class—grocers, butchers, and a publican or two—no doctor despises a publican as a patient, Fowler, whatever you may think of his mode of earning money. I'm not squeamish myself—he's honest and liberal in the spending of it."

"Go on. I concede the publican. May he require all the remedies in the pharmacopœia, and call on you to administer them."

"It has been a doctor's house for years, so it has the right tradition. The old chap died some weeks since—doesn't seem to have done much, but one may alter that. His widow will sell the connection for a trifle. It's a

great thing, Fowler, to succeed a doctor—worth a year's rent. Where patients have gone before they'll go again, there's a sort of instinct about it. It gives them confidence. I might rent the finest brand-new villa and not do half as well as in this old barrack."

"What about opposition?"

"Nairn is the only man to be feared. An Aberdonian, old type—but he takes with the county—the deferential, sympathetic, 'I am your humble servant' kind of manner. Sort of thing that goes down with some."

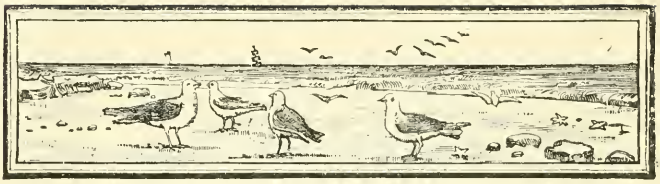
"Then you won't take," I said, with a laugh, thinking of his thrust-up chin and masterful air.

"It takes all sorts to make even a manufacturing world," he answered confidently. "Depend on it, there are some who would think none the better of you for cringing. Next to Nairn there's Black. Far more brains—a capital fellow as far as knowledge goes, but lacks the courage of his opinions. A man who hesitates has no business in the profession."

"How did you learn all this?" I asked wonderingly.

"Pooh! used my eyes and ears. In a place like this everybody talks. There are others, of course, the ground is pretty thick with them; but there's nothing much to fear from any one of them. At least, I think," he ended modestly—for with all his confidence he is not conceited—"I've as good a chance as any of them, given time and opportunity."

He could not have better credentials, and one has only to look at him to see that he is a gentleman. I, at least, had every faith in his success, and, like a fool, lay tossingly awake in the suffocating feather bed, picturing his brilliant future, and my own small share in it as spectator. He occupied an adjoining room, but when I wandered there in search of sympathy, ready for further talk, he was fast asleep. What a thing it is to have an absolutely faultless constitution and perfectly balanced nerves!



CHAPTER III.

WE went over the house next day, it had all the qualities Sutherland gave it; it was well built, the rooms of good size and proportion, the situation excellent. The widow of the late occupier—a depressed person with a lid that drooped like a furtive wink—made no difficulties about moving out: she was going to make her home with a married daughter in the North, and would take her bits of sticks with her. Shabby and frowsy enough they were to awaken suspicions as to the value of the connection she was eager to sell, but Sutherland would listen to no cautions. When we once more found ourselves in Hill Street, it was as virtual tenants of the house

in South Place, and prospective citizens of Shawbridge that we walked its pavement.

Sutherland ordered his brass plate that afternoon, and the next day, alive with zeal, insisted on our immediate return to Edinburgh to buy the necessary furniture, carrying me with him, solely, it would seem, to be a witness of his extravagance. I have heard him called a man who loved money, but never was there a more mistaken estimate of character. Influence and power he certainly desired: to succeed where others had failed, to do still better what had been done well was his ambition; but money he looked on as a mere medium for gaining his ends. One must live in a certain style; be free of sordid cares if one's mind were to be given to one's work: beyond that, wealth was to him valueless. His openhanded charities, had he ever cared to publish them, might have told a different tale; but until he dies—a poor man—no one else but I, and perhaps one other, will remember how far from him it was to hoard.

We went to a well-known furniture warehouse in George Street—that stately, wind-swept thoroughfare so disdainful to outward seeming of the trade that has invaded its borders, that the rattle of a cab upon its granite roadway rudely jars the silence, and the very comers and goers on the pavement, few as they number, are an insult to its dignity.

Familiar as it was in our student days, it took a new aspect now that we no longer scurried over its bleak, east-windy expanse on our way somewhere else, but came to patronize it with a pocket full of gold.

"Upon my word, it does seem a liberty," said Sutherland. "Like driving a bargain in Pompeii. It has caught the trick of a past civilization. You step back a century or two in leaving Princes Street for this."

For all that, in a dark-browed shop on its shady side, where the wind lurks like an assassin with unsheathed blade, we found the latest designs in tables and chairs, made yesterday, but guaranteed to outlast our joint

lives. Sutherland's purchases made a big inroad in his bank account. He would have everything of the best and most solid. The dining-room, consulting room, and hall, were his chief care. He was fastidious over the choice of the oak sideboard and chairs; and the Turkey carpet cost the salesman an hour's capering. The consulting-room was fitted with all the latest appliances; the entrance did equal credit to his taste and judgment, with its well-chosen engravings, harmonious rugs, and handsome stair-carpet; a grandfather's clock, warranted antique, was destined to mark the hours for us, and an iron-hinged chest, elaborately carved, and with a history we did not choose to consider apocryphal, kept it company.

"I did think of a smoking-den," he said, as we went down Hanover Street in search of lunch; "but there's the surgery and your quarters, if you haven't made them too finicking. Choice enough, and nobody to turn up a nose at the smell."

His own bedroom was the smallest in the

house, and fitted with an almost austere simplicity. Ours was, as will be seen, a man's house, pure and simple: everything for use, and not a single nicknack or frippery. Perhaps he recalled, as I did, the labour entailed in packing and unpacking the Japanese fans, the art pots and scarves, with which his mother burdened our travels.

"Not but what I suppose I shall marry some day," he used to say; "there's an unwritten tradition in the profession that you must be either married or a widower at the least to get on—heaven knows why!"

"An odd reason for marrying." I thought of his mother's words.

"As good a reason as another. A man needn't ill-treat his wife, because he chooses her from some other motive than the idiotic one that he's in love with her."

"Is it so idiotic?"

"It would be for me. A doctor marries for professional rather than personal reasons. A wife is either a help or a fettering hindrance. A girl with her head screwed on the right way,

with plenty of tact, and a little money of her own if she likes. It must be a galling thing for a woman, Fowler, to owe every penny to her husband: to come whispering and blushing for the price of a pair of stockings or a new bonnet."

"The woman you describe wouldn't think it hateful; she would exact as a right rather than petition as a beggar. If that's your ideal wife, Sutherland, may you be long in finding her."

"She isn't to be come across every day," he said, with a laugh; "and, if it will ease your mind, old man, I haven't found her yet."

But I had no fears. We settled down, as I say, as a bachelor household. Not a shade or shadow of womankind—even in the guise of the ubiquitous charwoman—crossed our threshold. On this point Sutherland had expressed himself with unusual strength.

"What—is the sex to have no admittance—even as a patient?"

"A patient is sexless," he rebuked me; "but your housekeeper would refuse to be

considered simply as a case. At the first brush she would shelter herself behind her womanhood, and we should be made to feel brutes!"

"By all means let us dispense with her, then. Write above your surgery door, 'Thus far and no further.' We have neither of us, I'm afraid, much skill in cookery, but tinned foods are plentiful——"

"We shan't be reduced to that pass. I've a man in my mind's eye who has nothing to learn from any woman. But of course you remember Burton?"

I remembered Burton. For one prosperous half year in our chequered travels he had been the guide, philosopher, friend of our little party—in other words, cook, housemaid, valet, personal conductor—a man of men, sparing of words but large of deeds. Our anxieties were at an end when Sutherland triumphantly tossed the telegram in which Burton accepted the situation across the table to me.

Burton, I may say here, highly approved of our arrangements. We provided him with a

button boy, an ornamental appendage who beguiled his time by flattening his nose against the window-pane, looking out for patients who never came. Burton ruled us with mild firmness, and guarded our possessions with zeal. The drawing-room, swept but ungarnished, he used as a nursery for his struggling seedling geraniums; the sun streaming in on them unrebuked, encouraged their faint efforts to live; indeed, the red pots with their weedy green-stuff, the pile of crocks, garden tools, watering-can dribbling on the bare boards, are still the impressions that remain most strongly with me, regarding "the mistress's room." The phrase was Burton's, bestowed in derision, perhaps, for he was an even more pronounced woman hater than either of his employers.

Looking back on them, those were happy days enough, though it seems to me now the insanest folly to have thought that Sutherland had but to show himself to conquer; to walk over the ground unopposed. He certainly did nothing to ingratiate himself. Medical

etiquette, it appears, demanded that he should call upon his fellow practitioners: this little ceremony he either forgot or neglected. He imported his drugs from London, and openly declared his satisfaction in being able to make experiments and write prescriptions unhampered by the criticism of the local 'chemist. He was tinctured with foreign methods and ideas, dangerous to the health of the community, in view of the established Sawbones', who clung to the time-honoured remedies handed down from their fathers, and looked upon the progressive younger school with profound distrust. Who was he—a new-comer—that he should sniff and poke, and make disparaging remarks about the drainage of Hill Street? He earned the enmity of no fewer than three cow-dealers by his officious use of the lactometer. Alas, alas, he was altogether wrong and in disgrace; too fine a gentleman for Shawbridge, where nothing was good enough for him. Let him go back to his Vienna and his Paris!

Over his head the storm passed harmlessly;

we had no dear friend to repeat all the tittle-tattle that busied itself with our concerns, and if he guessed that he had made himself obnoxious to Shawbridge, he was able to show himself quite indifferent to its contempt. He had no reason, so far as I know, to regret his choice, though the waiting time must have been far more fretting to his eager spirit than it was to me, anxious as I often was about the future. Since others wanted nothing of him, I had the more.

It was a happy time, as I have said, though Sutherland's carefully administered capital must have been melting like snow in March. While he secured but a stray case here and there—for the connection of the late doctor proved worthless — the mere gleanings of another's harvest, to keep hope alive, he read and studied continually. He would not go out in the daytime in case of missing a patient, and we fell into the way of taking exercise after dark, so that we scarce knew more than the night side of Shawbridge. Never for a moment did he lose sight of his aim, and I

have heard him say in later years that that leisure time did more for him than a thousand patients could have accomplished. I know it gave him a quicker sympathy with others who could less well afford to wait.

One day, shortly after our arrival, the Established Kirk minister rang our bell with a sonorous peal that echoed in the empty upper rooms. Burton was able conscientiously to say that we were out (we were smoking in the back garden). Mr. McPherson, of the U.P.'s, also called, bearing with him a card for a "social swarry"—innocent wile to draw us into his fold. Burton presented it solemnly on a salver with the strong cups of tea he brought out to the students seated under the weeping ash. We made its umbrageous shade our study during that first long, hot summer. There was also a lean Anglican curate, almost as despised as ourselves, who made a bid for us; and a black-avised Roman, who came openly seeking a subscription for the Irish mendicants, to whom he ministered.

Him Sutherland invited in; gave him a

donation and ordered refreshments. He was a Celt, with the vivacity and wit of his race, much beaten down by circumstances, but ready to spring up under encouragement. He became a frequent and amusing visitor, and that is no doubt how we came to have the evil reputation of being Papists.

The levier of rates and the collectors for innumerable charities were our only other visitors.

Once only, Sutherland spoke of his position. He had been summoned in the night to see a patient at the Angler's Arms—a visitor who had taken suddenly ill. The case promised to be one of some interest, and it awoke all his professional zeal; but when he returned next day to the inn he was told that Dr. Nairn had been called in, as the gentleman expressed a wish to consult the medical man who attended the family at Rossie Castle, Lord Minterly being an acquaintance of his. Sutherland felt the affront bitterly. His dark eyes smouldered fire; the perpendicular lines on his forehead seemed to be cut deeper as he

walked up and down the room pouring out his anger.

"Well," he said grimly, "it makes no difference. I mean to fight the thing out. They shall never say I sneaked away because they chose to boycott or to bully me. Short of starvation, nothing will make me budge. When my last coin is spent, I dare say I can get an assistantship somewhere or other, but that day isn't yet. I've been making a calculation, Fowler, and with ordinary prudence we can stand the siege for another six months or more. By that time we'll see who wins."

"The luck will turn," I cried, inspired by his confidence. And, indeed, having, as it were, flung his challenge in the face of fate, that fickle dame, after the manner of her sex, began to relent towards him; let her favours be but despised and she is ready to lavish them.

A week or two later and we had left the year of leanness behind us. Sutherland was sent for to the Castle: a groom in hot haste driving over to fetch him. A young gentle-

man visiting there had met with an accident while duck-shooting. Would the doctor come at once?"

"You remember him, of course?" Sutherland asked, tossing the note over to me, as he dived out of his smoking-jacket. "Young Coventry: the wonder is how he came to remember me."

It did not seem to me so very wonderful. This young sprig of the aristocracy had detained us for a week in a dull little German town where we had meant to halt for a mere hour or two. Accident brought us under the same roof, and Coventry, who was suffering from a sharpish attack of fever, hearing of the English doctor's presence in the hotel, begged his services.

"I have every reason to remember him. He kept us in that God-forsaken little hole for eight days, and ran us up a tremendous hotel bill—and you wouldn't charge him anything."

"And this," said Sutherland, "is the reward of that virtuous action."

He was off and downstairs three steps at a time, before I could reply; but I flung one of his slippers after him for luck. There are moments when one can afford to be superstitious.

The tide had turned. Sutherland was detained several days at the Castle, and during that time three people called at the surgery and went away manifestly disappointed.

Perhaps it would scarcely have consoled Sutherland to hear that only one of them had a decent coat to his back. A patient was infinitely more to him than his fee.

When he got home, however, I was able to tell him with triumph that Mrs. Laidlaw had sent for him three times.

"And who is Mrs. Laidlaw?" he asked.

Nothing could better illustrate our isolation than the fact that I was unable to enlighten him.

We had been a whole year in Shawbridge, and we did not know Mrs. Laidlaw!

CHAPTER IV.

"MY dear child, I'm afraid this is very irregular. It is quite against all precedent that the daughter of the Manse should spend herself and be spent in the service of dissent——"

"But we never think of Mr. Cunningham as a Dissenter," said Nancy Gillespie, standing behind her father's chair with a hand on his shoulder; "we don't label our friends—they're just our friends."

"Well, well! and how is the patient?"

"Not so well," said Nancy, gravely. "That is, he is recovering from his illness, but his sight is certainly failing. To-day when he tried to read a verse, he said, 'Surely the day

must be very grey and dark;' and you know how bright it has been."

"Weakness might account for that."

"Yes; but it has been gradually getting worse, and I can't help thinking the doctor is anxious, though he says nothing."

"Ah, the new doctor!" the minister sat up suddenly and spoke with animation. "What a thing it is to have a headstrong daughter!"

"I don't feel as if I had anything to 'fess," said Nancy, smoothing the hair over the tiny bald spot on the minister's crown.

"Yes, yes," he went on. "You were headstrong from your nursery days, when you insisted on making little Frank Cunningham your constant playmate."

"Don't scold me for that," the girl laughed. "I consider it an instance of wonderful discrimination on my part to have chosen Frank as my friend, instead of the little Ramseys you were always inviting to jam teas. Think of George Ramsey. What would my proper papa have said if I had insisted on sticking to him?"

"I'm afraid Frank Cunningham scarcely better justifies your choice."

"Oh, father, don't say that!" she coloured faintly. "Frank may be a little thoughtless: but he will never disgrace his people like poor George."

"I can't think why you never liked girls," said her father, testily.

"Well, I never did—much," she said reflectively, as if seeking a reason, and finding none. "Besides; wasn't it better, dear, that the children of the two Manses should play together, and so make a bond between their fathers, than that there should be alienation and bitterness, as there might have been? If our friendship—Frank's and mine—made that impossible, you will not grudge it?"

"My child," said the minister, whimsically, "you can scarcely ask me to believe that you were animated by any such motive as the healing of schism at the tender age of five. You were no more than that, I believe, when I first discovered you dragging young Cunningham out of the duck-pond."

"Yes," said the girl, laughing. "I believe it was that ducking that melted my heart to him. He looked such a poor, drouket little object, and he cried so bitterly—and then, it was partly my fault that he fell in. And now that he's away in London and can't look after his father, I think he would rather I did it than any one else."

"So it's for Frank's sake?" Dr. Gillespie frowned.

"No," she said frankly; "not altogether. If there were no Frank I should still love to serve Mr. Cunningham. Oh, father, you don't know how patient he is—and so grateful for the least little thing."

"You ought to know—you have been at his bedside daily for weeks—weeks during which I have had to do without you."

"Only for a little time in the afternoon," she murmured. "There are so many of his own people to help."

"And, to add to your iniquities, you must needs call in this new sprig of a doctor."

She had come round from behind his chair,

and as she stood by the mantelpiece, her hat swinging in one hand, the light fell clearly on her face. He watched her keenly.

"Oh, that was a mere accident! When Dr. Nairn fell ill, there was nobody else to send for. Margaret Baird was watching too, and she ran to fetch him. She said her husband would approve."

"There was Dr. Black."

"At the other side of the town! I suppose," her mouth took a humorous curl, "some kind person has been saying unpleasant things."

"The unpleasant things have all fallen on your father's shoulders. I am told it is *I* who have hindered this young man from acquiring a practice in Shawbridge. I am told that I have neglected him, turned my back on him; hinted, by my example, that he was unworthy of confidence, and, as if that was not enough, I am twitted with the fact that my own daughter is among the first of his worshippers."

"I recognize the voice of Mrs. Laidlaw. What an absurd old creature she is!" Nancy

was half provoked, half amused. "Worshipper, indeed!"

"So he doesn't strike you in the light of a victim——"

"A victim?" Her clear brows lifted themselves. "If that is the part Mrs. Laidlaw has assigned him, she'll find he won't fit it. He struck me as cool, clear-headed, perfectly able to look after himself—a man who knows his business and does it."

"And—good looking, perhaps? You will remember, my dear, that this person whose ambition I am supposed to have thwarted had not the courtesy to return my call. He took his walks, I am told, mostly at night, and shut himself up during the day. A singular personality.

"That's because he hadn't any patients, I dare say, or was waiting at home for them. Perhaps he was studying. I don't think I noticed him particularly in the few glimpses I've had of him. He's dark and tall—but I'll look specially next time and be able to tell you if he is handsome."

"You have as good as told me already."

"Oh, but, indeed, I was quite taken up with what he said about poor Mr. Cunningham. He has sent to Edinburgh for a specialist. They are to consult together to-morrow," her face became wistful, her grey eyes full of trouble. "To become blind — never to see the sun again—nor the faces of friends—oh, father, it is a pitiful fate!"

"Let us hope that help may yet avail," said the minister, with less than his usual fluency. He was a man who always found it easier to pipe for the dancers than to wail with the mourners, and sorry as he was for his neighbour's affliction, his daughter's grief seemed a little superfluous. And at the bottom of his heart, an old and vague uneasiness was astir. For a long time Nancy had not spoken of Frank Cunningham, and he had hoped she had forgotten him; now it seemed, she thought of him still with the same affection that had made her choose him as her childhood's friend.

The minister had never felt much sympathy

for that choice: he had been drawn—a little reluctantly—by his daughter's clinging hand, across the invisible boundary line that divided the Established Kirk Manse from the Free; but in the long years of a perfectly peaceful rivalry, he had come to respect, as all men respected his neighbour, the shy, gentle scholar, who wished ill to no living thing. But Frank was another affair: he had not even a right to his name, for, so far as was known, he was no kin to the minister, and was merely a son by adoption.

One day, many years before, there had come a letter to the Free Church Manse that had agitated the minister strangely; his housekeeper was scarcely less perturbed when he told her to prepare for so young a visitor. A nursery, and never a mistress to the Manse!

"My ward," he explained confusedly, when his ruling elder found him in his study watching the sleeping child: the books which usually cumbered the old sofa had been tumbled to the floor to make a nest for the baby, and Sunday's sermon was still a mere

chaos of notes. "My ward," not all Elder Proudie's careful mining could extract more. But, a little later, when the young thing had made a place in a lonely man's heart it was—"my son"—of whom he spoke with gentle pride. His people respected the minister's silence about the past of which, with all its possible tender associations for him, they knew nothing, for he was already verging towards middle life when he came to Shawbridge. If speculation were rife, no one ventured to question him, and Frank the nameless, became Frank Cunningham on the lips of all and in the hearts of some.

He was a fragile child, with a curious, sensitive dark face, that ripened into an odd kind of beauty, and he had a natural quickness of parts that made it easy for him to outstrip his fellow scholars at the grammar school. But if he was the dominie's pride and the parents' example, he was not a boys' boy, and there was not a lad on the same bench who did not thirst to thrash him. That he came off at their hands as well as he did

was in part owing to the ægis the maid of the Manse threw round him. This brave, bright lass, with the pink cheeks like the apple blossom in the minister's orchard, and the soft grey eyes like the sky above it on an April evening, was queen among them, to be awkwardly propitiated with gifts of apples and "gundy," and whom she chose to protect went safe. Frank was her friend; from the first that was an understood thing; he went to her in all his scrapes, and she rescued him as she had rescued him from the duck-pond, a good deal frightened and a little muddy, perhaps, but not much the worse.

Dr. Gillespie was thinking of these things when Nancy left him to run up and put away her hat and jacket: he recalled the numberless times he had seen the two white pinafores, the dark head and the flaxen, bobbing up and down among the berry bushes, or swinging on the apple-tree bough, or playing soldiers with the kemp grass stalks in the meadow, a war game in which Nancy forbore to press her victories, or, sitting on the same bench,

neither pair of chubby legs reaching the ground, studying the fearsome pictures in the Apocrypha — a Sunday afternoon's business this. He remembered his indignation when Nancy, sought in vain at the church bell's expiring tinkle, was found to have strayed over to the Free's, and how little her father thought this breach was atoned for by seeing Frank's black curls in the Manse pew as he looked down from the pulpit on the following Sunday. Always together, as boy and girl, as lad and lass ; Nancy the first to whom he showed the gold medals he carried off for Greek and the Humanities in his opening year at Edinburgh University, Nancy to whom, before any other, he confided his intention of going to London to make his way in literature and journalism.

Dr. Gillespie was a righteous man in the main, and it shamed him to own, even to himself, that he disliked the lad even more when he came home from college with his blushing honours thick upon him, than when he had cried and stamped his little foot because

he could not climb trees like sturdy Nancy, or fling the indiarubber ball half so far, for he knew that while women may pity and compassionate physical or moral weakness, they surrender before success. Or was it, perhaps, the stab of wounded vanity he felt when the student, whose praise was in professors' mouths, fixed him with that queer, inscrutable dark gaze, as he looked up from the Manse pew on the very first Sunday after his return? The sermon on the talents was an old one, but the congregation took it quite comfortably, knowing all its points in advance; only for the first time with this alien presence in his flock, the minister realized, half humorously, wholly pathetically, that he was liable to have very commonplace thoughts on every-day subjects.

"Frank," he said, quite sharply, meeting the young man in the churchyard; "you should have been sitting under your father this day—your first Sunday at home."

"So I was, this morning," Frank answered. Then he gave a little laugh. "By an odd

coincidence, the dad was preaching upon the talents, too," he said; and to the sore and angry divine his black eyes seemed to dance with mocking mischief.

"Nancy is coming over to pour out tea for us in honour of the occasion, she is pleased to say. Won't you come too, doctor? not to honour the occasion, but to honour my father and me."

But the doctor turned away abruptly, with a curt refusal. He was habitually good-natured, and he liked to stand in the church-yard—his market-place for greetings—and to receive his people's homage, but the young man's presence ruffled him, it took the savour out of his weekly incense. Let Nancy go; ay, but would not Nancy go, whether he willed it or not?

When Frank went forth to conquer the world, Dr. Gillespie hoped that the past would die, but Nancy kept it alive and aflame by her tenderness for Frank's father. The old, shy, silent minister was stricken when his boy left him. He had dreamed of a prop

for his age; a voice to succeed him in the pulpit, but he uttered no word of reproach.

"Each man's life is his own; as his soul is his own, to work out as he may its salvation. Be true to the highest within you, dear lad, and your success will be the joy of my declining years, as your presence has been the light of my home."

In his emotional, half-foreign way, Frank kissed the old hands that blessed him; he kissed Nancy's full red lips also, as he had not kissed them since some childish reconciliation after quarrel—a pledge, as she took it, in her innocent way, to bind her friendship faster. So she and the old minister, left lonely, talked of him together, read his eager letters, and praised his brilliant outset, and found a thousand good reasons to answer the pain in their hearts when it soon became dimmed. Frank had not forgotten them—oh, never, never—but the far country is a long way off, and to those who live in its whirl, the past recedes like a landscape at the wrong end of the perspective glass.

Home lies yonder still, safe and unchanged, but how few save the beaten and the vanquished go back to it.

* * * * *

When Nancy came down again and began to help the young housemaid in her preparations for supper, the minister brightened. He was of a sociable disposition, and did not often yield to reflective moods. Nancy, too, looked a thoroughly heart-whole young woman as she moved about between study and kitchen—where Ann Rutherford presided—drawing curtains, lighting the lamp, and kneeling to apply a match to the fire. A fire was an indulgence offered to the minister's love of comfort, and so was the supper-tray, set cosily on the table at his elbow.

"If you were a properly brought up father," she said, coaxing the newspaper with gingerly fingers to attack the firewood, "you would go into the dining-room and sit at one end of the table while I sat at the other, with the cold mutton between us. These picnic meals are ruining Ann's temper."

The minister sniffed the savoury odour that penetrated from the kitchen, and thanked heaven she was not as other daughters. "And, after all," thought he, "there are a great many young women in London, and a young man's fancy sometimes strays." It was on the tip of his tongue to ask the latest news of Frank, but he pulled himself up short. Why send her thoughts down that undesirable track?

"Little was inquiring for you to-day," he said. "He has a high opinion of you, Nancy."

"Oh, we mutually admire each other—Mr. Little and I. He likes me because I am young, and I like him because he is old and sage on all points but one. He goes to Mrs. Laidlaw's symposiums."

"That reflects on your father, Nancy."

"Yes; it reflects on my father," she laughed. "Why do you go there, I wonder, you men? Is it because you like to be scolded and lectured? But we could do that at home, you know!"

"Mrs. Laidlaw is a power in the land, my

dear. She is by far the largest heritor in the parish."

"And the poorest giver!" said the girl, with quick scorn.

"Nevertheless, your friend, the new doctor, would do well to propitiate her. If she takes him up, as she appears inclined to do, he is a made man."

Nancy began to laugh.

"Now I will tell you a story," she said. "Margaret Baird whispered it to me to-day in the dressing-room, when Mr. Cunningham was sleeping—of course I won't be answerable for the truth of it. Your Mrs. Laidlaw sent for Dr. Sutherland——"

"And he didn't go?" incredulity was in the minister's voice.

"The first time he was at the Castle; the second time he was also at the Castle; the third he was at the Free Church Manse. When the messenger followed him there he went to the back door. He's unconventional you see.

"'What is the matter with your mistress?' he asked.

"Poor old Andrew shuffled and shuffled, and at last, as if the answer lay in his feet, he said he 'jaloused there was naething wrang. The mistress was in her usual.'

"'Then please tell her I only visit people who are out of their usual.'

"'Eh, man!' cried the dumfounded Andrew, 'she'll be that fast enough, gin ye dinna gang!'

"'Well,' said the doctor, with a laugh, 'we'll wait developments;' and he nodded poor old Andrew away. Now, what does my papa, who knows his Mrs. Laidlaw, think will happen to that rash young man?"

The doctor shook his head. "Rash indeed, to quarrel gratuitously with his bread and butter. Talk of my being a bar to his success—as if the parish minister could make or unmake a man." He paused, perhaps expecting Nancy to correct this too modest estimate of his powers, and at her silence his tone took on tartness. "He has no one but himself to thank if he fails—as fail he inevitably will."

"What would you have him do?' Nancy asked mischievously.

"Any but a fool would have obeyed her summons."

"And administered a bread pill?" Nancy smiled. "I'm afraid he must have heard a little about Mrs. Laidlaw before he went to interview Andrew at the back door. So you think she will snub him? Shall I tell you what I think? I think she will immediately place him on that pedestal which your neglect, wicked papa, was supposed to raise for him. She'll praise him and advertise him, and be humbly grateful and very gracious when he does condescend to call."

"Tut—tut, child! you don't know Mrs. Laidlaw."

"No; but I know women."

"That, my child, might be called a feminine *non sequitur*."

"Is it?" said Nancy, meekly. "If you are going to talk in strange tongues, I think I'll go to bed."

CHAPTER V.

SUTHERLAND was greatly interested in the old minister's case; it was the first of any importance to which he was called after he was able to forego daily attendance upon young Coventry at the Castle, and he gave his whole mind to it. He said the old man reminded him of a sculptural head of Fra Angelico we had seen in one of the churches in Rome—a lean ascetic head, hollow at the temples, a face high cheek-boned, patient, with a worn sweetness of look. I dimly recall it illuminating some dark corner of a tawdry, over-bedecked interior, the exact site forgotten. From what Sutherland dropped from time to time, the resemblance did not cease with

the outer man; the Scotch Calvinist had his share of the Italian monk's devout and childlike nature.

"He doesn't seem to have drawn a large congregation, and perhaps no wonder. Few people can breathe such rarefied air as he lives in for long; the kirk across the dividing fields probably suits easy-going consciences better. But he has his following. There's always somebody waylaying me to ask for him."

"Who looks after him?"

"Oh, a variety of women," he said, with a faint contempt. "I see a new face at his bedside most days. The clergy woman belongs to no sect."

"Then he isn't married?"

"No; a widower, I think. I heard something of a son, but only to excuse his absence. He's in London, it seems—not such an insurmountable distance when one's father's going blind—but *pace* sentimentality. I dare say I'd have stayed away in his place."

As if he would!

This was at the first. In a little place like Shawbridge one soon hears all the gossip that is going. I had urged Sutherland to call on Mrs. Laidlaw, having been warned by some of our new acquaintances of the importance of securing her good graces ; but he refused.

"There's nothing the matter with her, except a superabundance of adipose tissue! I'll frighten her with that, if she insists upon calling me in. She ought to walk, rather than be dragged about in that Bath chair. Time enough? No, I haven't, not for that kind of visiting. If it's so necessary to observe the proprieties, you'd better do it for both of us."

"It isn't me she wants."

"Well, when she really wants me, she'll have me. Those old women, with no complaints at all, or only imaginary ones, are the plague of a doctor's life; if he prescribes for them, he loses his self-respect; and if he's honest and doesn't, they'll do their best to damage his practice. The only safe way is to steer clear of them."

He went whistling to the surgery, having metaphorically, as it were, washed his hands of Mrs. Laidlaw. Of course he couldn't get rid of her so easily, and it seemed a pity he should stand in his own light. Report called her immensely rich, though it added, she considered the honour of attending her reward enough, and paid no doctor's bills. Still, her good word was a fortune, and there was no likelihood that Dr. Nairn would recover from the paralysis that had struck him down. But if his assistant and successor had a more pliable back? Sutherland thought none of these thoughts; you could not bend him to circumstances; they had to incline to him. But I could have wished he had less human obstinacy; prejudices are poor fare to live on.

It was, after all, a woman who came to the rescue. Sutherland was out, seeing Mr. Cunningham; he was watching him till the time was ripe for a consultation, and I was sitting alone with my book, when a cab, over-burdened with luggage, drew up at our

door. Burton, with a foreboding brow, presented a card.

"The doctor is out, Burton," I said.

"Yes, sir; but when I told the lady, she said you would do."

I glanced unwillingly at the card, and read on it, "Mrs. Tom Carnegie." At first the name carried no meaning; then I remembered that a year or so before a fragment of mouldy wedding cake and a newspaper, announcing Colonel Carnegie's marriage, had reached us. Archie had amused himself at the black sheep's effort to wash his fleece.

"Is she waiting?" I asked, hoping Burton would assure me that the lady had vanished; but he answered, in a voice of gloom—

"She's waiting, sir; *and* the maid. The cabman and Thomas are carrying the luggage into the hall."

She rustled in graciously—a woman, young still, who was pretty in an indefinite sort of way, and with taking manners.

"We are cousins, though we have never met," she said; "that must be my excuse for this unannounced descent."

Even when I corrected the mistake, she delicately insinuated that at least we must be friends. In five minutes she had explained, in the lightest possible manner, that she and Colonel Carnegie had been visiting in the neighbourhood, and that her husband had unexpectedly been called away on business.

"I do so detest business," she said, with a smile on her lip; but I read care in her eyes. Poor Colonel Tom was no doubt suffering once more a temporary eclipse. "Tom thought perhaps Dr. Sutherland and you would extend your hospitality to me for a day or two, till he could rejoin me." He had written; we had not got the note? Ah, country posts were so tiresome—you couldn't depend on them! But he had certainly written. She had brought her maid—a quiet girl, who would give no trouble. She hoped she was not making a dreadfully inconvenient request?

There was nothing for it but to reassure her. Sutherland came in presently—Colonel Carnegie's note in his hand, and welcomed

her genially. As a host his manner was admirable.

"I was hurried in going out, and forgot to prepare you for this pleasure, Fowler," he said to me. "I'm the most unpractical of managers, as I'm afraid you'll find, Mrs. Carnegie, but I believe I did remember to order luncheon."

"If I might remove my bonnet, and wash away the stains of travel?" she suggested; and I believe it then occurred to him, for the first time, to wonder how she and a maid were to be accommodated in our strictly bachelor household. I was maliciously inclined to leave him to his embarrassment, but that I knew Burton would be equal to the occasion. He had indeed, in an incredibly short time, stripped my room and dressing-room of all signs of masculine possession, and the maid was already unpacking frills and furbelows and strange feminine vanities where books and pipes had reigned in peace. The pipes I found in the disused nursery at the top of the house, keeping company with

a hurriedly gathered wardrobe; the books, mostly in foreign tongues, aroused, I believe, Mrs. Carnegie's lively curiosity, and gave her the damaging and erroneous impression that "cousin Archie's companion" was clever.

Burton apologized for my unhandsome quarters, but they had compensating advantages, as he pointed out.

"You'll find it quieter like, if it is a garret. Where there's women in a house there's sure to be clashes; but you'll be safe up here. I'll bring up your bath and the easy-chair after lunch. You'll find your papers all right, sir."

It was silent enough now, where once the patter of feet and the voices of children had made music. The gay, fabled people on the walls played to no audience; they seemed to me, indeed, to wear an air of forlorn chagrin at my intrusion; the spring wind shook the iron bars at the casement as if to ask had his old playmates returned? I had last glanced at this room when the widow of the late occupier showed Sutherland

and me over the house. She had hurried forward to open a shutter, so that the doctor might be able to tell his lady what excellent accommodation there was for her little family. How Sutherland had laughed at her incredulous face when he said—

"You see all the family there is before you, madam!"

She told him, with a shaken head, it would be against his practice that he was unmarried.

Perhaps she was right, but how pleasant a comradeship ours had been, no woman coming between. And here, all at once, we were being converted into a "family" by no design of ours, and who could tell to what this invasion of petticoats would lead.

Mrs. Tom settled down quickly, and adapted herself, with fine feminine tact, to our ways, seeming to follow where she really led. She took our deficiencies very amiably. Of course there was no drawing-room. Didn't she, who had brothers and a husband, know how men hated a woman's room? all little tables and slim chairs you couldn't sit down

on lest they should break under you, and no room to turn round. The dining-room quite met with her approval—so solid and handsome—nothing superfluous. That was how it should be.

But though she fitted herself gracefully into Archie's big leather easy-chair she seemed too fine and foreign a thing for its homeliness, in her black lace evening dress, with the glimmer of white throat and arms, and it was impressed upon our consciousness, for the first time, that to sit in the room where one had dined, with the odours of that meal, and the reminiscences of many pipes impregnating the air, was not, perhaps, so altogether delightful as it had appeared. I met Sutherland restlessly exploring upstairs next evening.

"I say, isn't there a cushion anywhere about?" he asked; "or a footstool? And, look here, what's the matter with the table?—it looks awfully bare."

"Let's ask her," I said.

She laughed.

"Perhaps a few flowers?" she suggested. "I am educating Tom to appreciate flowers —the only uses they represented to him before were buttonholes. He has got the length of tolerating them on the table, and that is a very, very big step for a man! Of course, waifs and strays as we are, we can't have things very nice and natty, but flowers are a wonderful consolation to the feminine mind."

"You shall have as many as you like to-morrow," said Sutherland.

"And we'll make a nice little oasis up at this end," she said, turning a shoulder to look at the table. "It's that big expanse of oak between us that paralyzes one's powers of speech. You feel as if you ought only to send superior remarks across such a gulf. And—I'm afraid of Mr. Fowler."

"His superiority hasn't extinguished me," said Archie. "Perhaps, when you get nearer him, you'll find he's only made like the rest of us."

Somehow she brightened the house wonder-

fully. She interested herself readily in all sorts of little things; she made friends with the charwoman who had come to supplement Burton's labours and act as chaperon to the demure maid—and even Burton himself softened towards a lady who gave so little trouble. Every morning she would come down with an eager look in her eyes, and when she found no letter on her plate it would fade, making her look suddenly ten years older. What had she seen in poor Tom to marry him, and, having condescended to him, how dared he cause her a moment's anxiety?

It was the thought of Colonel Tom's probable failings as a husband that warmed Sutherland towards her, I think; if he habitually thought of women as weak, their frailty never failed to arouse his chivalry. He treated her with a bantering friendliness that pleased and amused her, and reminded her, she said, of her brothers at home.

"Do you know," she confided in me one day, "I think it's a very good thing I came, after all."

"I've never had any doubt of it," I hastened to say.

"Oh yes, you had!" she laughed. "You should have seen what a horrified face you wore that day I walked in on you; and when you told me Tom had not written, I wondered if you took me for an impostor. He does so hate writing letters; but I stood over him till that note was written, and I posted it myself. Then I took my courage in both hands, and came——"

"And saw, and conquered."

She shook her head.

"Even if I'm a nuisance—and of course I am—upsetting a bachelor household, I think I can do a little something to make up. You see, men are helpless creatures, after all, before a social difficulty; and a doctor's home, especially, is no home at all without a woman. There wouldn't have been that year of waiting you told me of, if you had had a woman to preside here, Mr. Fowler."

"If you're formulating a scheme to get

Archie married," I cried; and at my dismayed countenance she became grave again.

"Indeed I'm not so foolish as to meddle in that way," she said. "Marriage is a great venture, and nobody—nobody should come between, or to try to draw two people together." She was seated in a basket-chair at the open window of the empty drawing-room, where she was sheltered from the east wind, and shared the bright sun with Burton's geraniums, and her vehemence made me wonder if she were speaking out of her own experience. "I was only thinking," she went on, after a pause, "that my being here would give people an excuse to call."

"Is that what they've been waiting for?"

"The ladies, certainly. They couldn't very well call on two young unmarried men—could they?—though I dare say they have been devoured with curiosity. There would be the husbands and brothers to reckon with. But, now that I'm here, and vouched for as quite respectable, they needn't be afraid of

Mrs. Grundy. She's always a terrible person in a little town, you know."

"I think she must go by the name of Laidlaw here." I sketched that bogey's characteristics, and described Archie's obdurate refusal to propitiate her.

"Oh, that will be all right!" she said brightly. "As Mrs. Laidlaw is an old lady, it will be my duty to call first. I dare say she knows the Lorimers, with whom Tom and I were staying—if she doesn't, she'll be pleased that I should imagine she does! And I will tell her all about you both, and she'll be so anxious to see you that she won't dream of making that impossible by quarrelling with Cousin Archie."

"Are you going to make us so attractive?"

"I'm going to make you delightful! But, first of all, we must get permission to brighten up the house a bit."

"What's amiss? What does it look like?"

"Dreadfully like a man's house! Why, you've no curtains in the upper rooms!"

"They're not furnished."

"That's a little fact you should gracefully drape. And not even a flower or a dickey bird! A pretty house inspires women with confidence; and, after all, they are the chief employers of doctors, aren't they?"

"They could have called Sutherland in without coming here. He says a doctor ought to draw a strict line between the professional and social sides."

"Ah, but that is a mistake," she said, with a pretty air of authority. "In small places people must know all about you before they trust you. I've lived in a country town, and I know what it is. You mustn't have any reticences."

"What—not any?"

"Oh, you may think what you like, of course, but the outer circumstances of your life—your food, servants, rent, clothes—are public property; you must be amiably sociable—if you've any little idiosyncrasies of your own you must sacrifice them for the common good."

"I'm afraid you'll find it hard work to

persuade Archie to take that view. He has 'nae broo' of the common good in that sense."

"Oh, it won't be necessary for him to trouble. His wife will do all the needful sacrificing, and, since she is not here yet, I am going to play my humble little part instead."

She was right in one thing. After her first Sunday in the parish church (she made me go with her) the ladies of Shawbridge began to call. Perhaps there was for them some mysterious signal in the fresh draperies that appeared, as if by magic, at every window, and in the look of sprightliness the house assumed. Sutherland, in his lavish way, would have furnished the drawing-room to please her, but she earnestly protested. What was she but a mere bird of passage, waiting for her laggard lord? A drawing-room was the mistress's special province, and it was the wife's privilege to adorn it. "What would your wife say if she found I had forestalled her, Archie?"

At this reiterated "wife" he laughed, yet not so spontaneously as usual.

So the Shawbridge ladies were received in the dining-room, and by some art or guile she managed to propitiate them all. She consulted them about her shopping, and was led by their advice; she was sympathetic on the iniquities of servants, and interested in childish complaints; the womenkind of the great tweed lords, who dashed up to our door in their fine carriages, pronounced her charming: wasn't she the wife of a military man who was cousin to an earl? Sutherland shone in her reflected glory. They had always known he was a gentleman; to hear them, you would think they had all along been alive to his merits, and only waiting a chance to prove his skill.

Particulars of these interviews were related to me, as she sat in her basket-chair warming her pretty feet in the sun, and she diligently coached me in my social duties.

"So much will devolve on you," she said, "until——"

"Until Archie gets another partner"—perhaps some hidden bitterness came out in the words, for she looked at me gently.

"You yourself must marry some day."

If I had contradicted her she would not have understood; so I held my peace.

The day she went to call on Mrs. Laidlaw she would not let me accompany her beyond the door of the old mansion in Shaw Street, though I would have braved the bogey, if it would have helped her.

"We'll get on best alone, and I'm not one atom afraid of her!" she waved me a little farewell as she was swallowed up in the dark doorway.

I hung about, making a pretence of studying the sadler's window, and inspecting the specimens of split peas and oatmeal displayed in the corn chandler's, half expecting to find her making a hurried retreat; but it was a good hour by my watch before I saw her crossing with light step the angle of South Place, and her face was serene.

"For pity's sake, a cup of tea!" she cried,

as I ran to meet her. "The dear old lady was so much taken up with asking questions that she forgot to offer me any. No, Lydia, never mind my bonnet—and bring tea here. Oh no, the ogress didn't devour me"—she laughed, as she sipped the cup I poured out for her. "She was very gracious indeed. I had to give her an outline of the family history—what a good thing Tom drilled me in the Carnegie pedigree! I'm afraid I may have bestowed on Cousin Archie an uncle or so who doesn't belong to him; but it explains him better to her consciousness than the distinguished college career *we* are proud of. She gave me to understand that he owes his present popularity to her. Some message, too, I was to deliver, about a letter——"

"H'm—do you think that's needful?"

"Oh, you blush; you are betrayed! So it's you who wrote it!"

"Only to do the civil—Archie ought to have called."

"He'll soon have occasion. I believe she means to have a nice little convenient illness

as an excuse to call him in. As for you, I promised you would go to see her one day this week."

And when I protested that I would do nothing of the sort, she looked at me reproachfully.

"I thought you would do anything for your friend!" she said. "Ah, that's the way of men! They are all promises and willingness; but ask them to leave their books and easy-chairs and pipes, to perform the commonest act of politeness, and where are all their protestations? It is we poor women who have to make all the sacrifices."

"As if you didn't like it!" I cried. "The tea and the gossip——"

"Not gossip—useful information. Shawbridge has been turned inside out for my benefit. She spoke of Mr. Cunningham."

"She couldn't say anything nasty of him."

"No." She was silent, toying with the bread-and-butter for quite two minutes. Then she gave me a queer sidelong glance.

"Do you remember that handsome girl in the Manse pew at the Established Church?"

"Miss Gillespie? Yes; I've seen her once or twice."

"She is nursing Mr. Cunningham; she is there every afternoon. Isn't it sweet of her?" she cried. "I think it's perfectly charming. One hears so much of jealousies and rivalries between the churches; but what could be prettier than her devotion to an opponent?"

But I couldn't share her enthusiasm.

"That handsome girl"—"She is there every afternoon." The words made a dull tune in my head, and it had no melody in it.

CHAPTER VI.

WHY had Archie never mentioned her? Did he contemptuously class her among those clergywomen, trotting humbly at the skirts of parsons, he had spoken of? But I had seen her, and knew she was a woman one must needs single out even in a crowd. Her face was the only sermon for me on that Sunday when Mrs. Carnegie and I went to her father's church. A fine face, blithe and strong, and yet tender; eyes a little sad, perhaps, but the mouth quietly humorous. She was a grandly made young creature, and when the precentor raised the psalm tune she stood half a head taller than any woman near her. The sermon was of the flowery order that tends to vagrant thoughts: an anecdote or two, a

reiteration of the text; some selections of sacred verse mouthed with impressiveness. The doctor, her father, struck one as a benevolent, well-meaning humbug; but she listened to his oratory with an interest and a respect that had an air of being genuine. A good daughter, no product of the dying century; yet Sutherland saw her every day, and said nothing.

"He probably finds her a good nurse," I said to Mrs. Carnegie.

It was the day following her visit to Mrs. Laidlaw on which this remark was made, and it struck me afterwards that she did not ask me to whom I was referring. Instead she smiled and said—

"Probably he does. Some day he will wake up and find she is a woman."

"You are determined there must be a woman."

"It is Kismet," she answered. "We come into every man's life, somehow, some time or other, and influence it for good or evil. It's our revenge for the inferior place you still

insist on our accepting in the order of creation —Men, women, and——

"Clergymen. Not the lowest place, after all, you see. By the way, talking of clergy, what do you think of Dr. Gillespie?"

"He's a dear! Handsome to behold, and gracious to talk to. He rescued me the other day from a horde of savages, which had taken possession of Shaw Street, and threatened to annihilate me. I am to go and have tea at his Manse."

"What, while Miss Gillespie is playing the Samaritan?"

"Oh no; she is to be at home to receive me. It was settled that day I met them at Mrs. Lang's."

"You never told me you had met her." A jealous pang shot through me.

"Didn't I?" she answered lightly. "But then, I meet so many people, you see, and sometimes I am afraid my talk about them bores you. It's so difficult to make them interesting, for they all do and say the same things, and wear the same clothes. But I dare say

Miss Gillespie will be different when one gets her alone. I will tell you all about my visit when I come home. And I will find out if I can"—she spoke demurely; love of teasing is inbred in women—"whether she is so very, very superior that you wouldn't be so disrespectful as to think of her as a mere woman. That would account for Cousin Archie keeping silent about her, wouldn't it?"

So she, too, had noticed his silence!

Of course you will say, why were you such an idiot as not to ask him openly; but Sutherland is not a man to be questioned. He has his reticences, which you must needs choose to respect. And less than ever could I question him when Mrs. Carnegie had left us. She took her departure quite suddenly, before that cup of tea had been offered at the Manse.

It was one of Tom Carnegie's inconvenient ways to present himself without announcement, assuming a welcome that was not always forthcoming. Surprises are the most foolish of grown-up tricks. His wife was instructing me in the care of certain plants, which now

bloomed an invitation in our windows, when a loud ring at the bell was followed by a still louder voice making itself very much at home in the hall. At the sound she started away from my side, blushing and quivering, and in another minute her two little grubby hands, that had so fearlessly stirred the soil as she illustrated her lecture, were clasped round the warrior's neck, she all heedless of the gaping button-boy, who stood taking in the scene. What do women, such as she, see in men like our colonel that they should give so freely the treasure of their love? I lingered behind her, not to witness their meeting, and they came in presently, he looking a trifle sheepish and ashamed of himself, and blustering the more to hide it.

"Well, how are you, Fowler? Look less weedy than when I saw you last. By ——" something or somebody—his profanity had acquired a milder turn since marriage, "you've got a capital crib here. Where's young Sawbones?"

"Dr. Sutherland is out."

"The colonel fears we cannot wait to say good-bye to him," she struck in, standing by him and holding one of his big hands. "He says we must catch the train going South in an hour. Aren't husbands inconsiderate creatures, Mr. Fowler? Here is mine calling for me as if I were a package, and he expected to find me all carefully tied up and labelled! Why, Lydia will sulk for a week if I make her do the work of four hours in one."

"Let her," said the colonel, with a few more expletives. "You've either got to be ready, little woman, or I must go without you."

She faltered out a word of regret for leaving us.

"You've been so good, both of you," she said; "my husband and I can never thank you enough for sheltering me."

"When I was down on my luck," he said, with a gloomy laugh. "Relations are some use in the world."

"And I am very sorry to leave my new relatives," she said prettily; but her face in its new brightness belied her.

What cared she for all our endeavours to please her—the queen we had made of her—now that her scrapegrace of a lord had come to claim her? While she was hastily stuffing into her boxes those pretty costumes worn to enchant us, the colonel graciously accepted my offer of refreshment. It was but eleven o'clock, but the breakfast dishes were brought back and the whisky fetched from the sideboard; and, while he regaled himself, he was pleased to give me his reasons for leaving in such hot haste. They were not very clear, but perhaps they were imperative. He had not improved since the days when, as lads, Sutherland and I had laughed at his big stories and his airs of adventure; perhaps he had gone too far down the hill for even marriage to pull him up. He cared for his young wife as much as it lay in him to care for any one save himself, but he used her too. If she was poor, she was well born; and her connections, as he made no scruple of owning, served some of his ends.

Sutherland looked black when he heard of the sudden exit.

"Confound the fellow! Does he take my house for an inn," he cried, "that he can come and order his food and swallow it and go, without so much as a 'How d'ye do?'"

But next moment he laughed.

"So he was afraid I would question him, was he?" he said; and then I learned that the colonel had written a day or two before to ask for a temporary loan.

"And you gave it to him?"

"He has made it precious difficult to refuse," he said grimly; and I knew he was thinking of the poor lady who might have to suffer if her husband's requests were not punctually met.

We missed her more than it seemed possible for two such professed woman-haters to miss a little person who was not so particularly clever or wise, but who was always gay and good tempered. The piano Sutherland had hired, that she might sing to us in the drawing-room—its emptiness the best condition for music-making, she told us—was packed off to the shop; we sunk back into bachelor

ways—no more dressing for dinner—no more flower decorations—no more abstention from pipes. For a day or two an echo of her ballads, gay or pathetic, seemed to linger about the house. Archie would hesitate before his big chair, as if he saw a little figure seated there in all its gay bravery. Did he, indeed, begin to feel the house lonely without a woman in it? I found a forgotten glove in the drawer of my dressing-table, and was sentimental enough to preserve it as a memento.

But, after all, her visit was but an episode, and, over, it was soon forgotten. One good turn, however, she had done us in explaining us to Shawbridge. We were vouched for now; even my humble pedigree being public property; and the ladies, finding us less of adventurers than we had seemed, vied with each other in securing Sutherland's services. Some of them, perhaps, had convenient little ailments on purpose. He had no longer reason to complain of neglect, and was rapidly taking the place of Dr. Nairn, now hopelessly

invalided; but a veil seemed to have fallen between his life and mine. Of his daily work I heard but the vaguest details. The doctor is a priest too, his bosom a confessional whence the secrets wrung from humanity in its hour of anguish never escape. Far different was it from the days when we had read and studied together, and talked and argued into the small hours of the night. Sutherland was never to be counted on; he was called here and there, in and out at uncertain times. We scarcely ever took a meal together, for he imperiously forbade me to wait for him. His food was hashed up, kept warm, or hastily cooked to suit his convenience. In his leisure hours he was often absorbed and absent-minded or shut up in his surgery, his patients, no doubt, filling all his thoughts.

Yet while I sat alone, with some loss of relish even for the old and well-tried friends on my bookshelf—there are times when human companionship is worth all the wisdom of the ancients—I was haunted by a recurring fear that would not be shaken off. Was it

the measles in the Fletchers' nursery, or the scarlet-fever epidemic in Mr. Brown's seminary for little boys, or Mr. Burton's sciatica that alone filled his mind? Was it even the swift-coming darkness that made the Free Church minister's pathetic lot something more than a mere case to him? Was it, perhaps, the nurse rather than the patient upon whom he dwelt as he secluded himself among his bottles and pills and powders?

They say that jealousy is a woman's infirmity, but men can suffer this evil passion too, when aught threatens a lifelong friendship. I know that the demon had even then begun to torture me, until a mere vagrant fancy, born of idle words, became a rooted conviction. Sutherland had seen the woman he could love, and I should lose him.

One afternoon, when he was out upon his rounds, an urgent summons came for him. I was going out, and almost ran against the waiting messenger at the front door. Burton, who had answered the bell, consulted the slate, but gathered no light from it. The doctor

had started on his rounds at ten—he might be here or he might be there; it was Burton's cue to make his master overwhelmed with work, but he would be told he was wanted whenever he came in.

"Look here," I said, taking the matter into my own hands, and speaking to the anxious man who stood panting and perspiring on the door-step, "try Brown's. You know it? The school for little boys in Pipe Lane. My road takes me past the Free Church Manse; and I'll look in and tell the doctor, if he's there. He's pretty safe to be at one or other place, and this will save time."

The man thanked me, and hurried off, while I took the opposite direction, pleased with my own cleverness. Yet, the heat of the moment past, when I asked myself what I expected to gain, I could not tell. Would the house cry aloud the secret I longed to wrest from it?

The Manse, a plain harled building of no pretensions, stood in an ample garden, well tended and cared for. Across the fields lay

the other Manse; by that brown path Miss Gillespie came to play her part of ministering angel. The house door stood wide open, perhaps for air, for the late days of spring had borrowed the warmth of summer. As I was about to lift my hand to ring, a woman in out-door dress—a member of the sick man's congregation, no doubt—came towards me. For whom she mistook me I know not; but she received me as one expected.

"The doctor——" I began; and she nodded, and said in a whisper that he would be here presently. With a lifted finger, cautioning silence, she indicated a door that stood open to the right of the narrow lobby. Thinking that she recognized me, and perhaps guessed my errand, I accepted her invitation to enter, while she went out noiselessly down the gravel path.

It was plainly the minister's study in which I found myself—a room barely furnished, save for the crowding books upon the deal shelves—books much handled; a student's library, with an air of orderly disorder. But I had scarcely

noted this, or the old-fashioned desk with its mass of papers, when I became aware that the door of an inner room stood half open; from its position it was probably the sitting-room of the Manse, but it had been converted to the sick man's use. I knew it as I stood embarrassedly there, for I heard him speak.

"I have been a long time ill?" he asked; and a woman's voice answered gently—

"A long time."

"So long that I have forgotten the time of year."

"It is nearly the end of May; but the blossom is still white upon the trees. The spring delayed, but it is lovely now."

"Yet such a dark day."

For a moment there was silence; the woman's voice, when it rose again, had a break in it.

"It is a sunny day—fair and clear."

She drew up the blind, revealing a glass door that led to the garden, and as the light flooded the room I saw all its details plainly. Why I stayed to look and listen I cannot tell;

I have no excuse to offer, unless it be one to say that I could not drag myself away. There, on an old-fashioned wooden bed, lay the minister, his white hair spread upon the pillow like frosted silver, his face gaunt and worn, with no beauty in it save that of a white soul shining through the mask, his eyes travelling round in search of the light denied. Miss Gillespie remained at the window, her back turned to the room; she stood rigid and motionless, seeing nothing of the outward beauty she had pictured to him. The hardest pain, perhaps, is to suffer hopelessly for another.

At a sigh from the invalid she turned, and knelt by the bed. Her eyes had unshed tears in them, and her mouth quivered; her voice faltered as she said—

"You feel the warmth, don't you?" And indeed a beam fell full upon his white head, and illumined his haggard face. There was a wistful trouble like the trouble of a child on it.

"I feel the warmth; but there is a veil before my eyes. Will you draw back the curtain?"

She did not move. A divine pity was in her eyes. She could let it rest there now, for he could not see it to shrink from it.

He turned restlessly on his pillow.

"I thought it might be a dream," he said, the first bitter wave of truth breaking on him. She took his hand, worn and yellow like an old ivory, and bowed her forehead upon it.

"If the veil should not be lifted here, could you bear it, dear?"

There was a silence, and in it I heard her sob. How many things he must have thought of in that keen sword-thrust of anguish by which his fate was made clear to him—thought of to renounce: the books upon the homely shelves, the pen and ink scarce less dear to a scholar; the flowers that helped his evening meditations, as he walked between their shining rows; the faces that had looked up to him for years and years on Sundays in the high pulpit while he delivered the divine message; that sought his in the little study with sorrow that came sure of comfort, or joy that knew it

would be shared. Who would blame rebellion against so cruel a sentence? Yet when he spoke at last it was with the resignation possible to one alone who has mastered the secret of peace.

"It has pleased God to take back that which was His gift, blessed be His name. Hush, my bairn!" for she was weeping now the tears he would not shed. "Think of all the years I have had the blessing of sight, and shall I murmur because my Master asks me to travel the last miles of the long journey in the dark? An hour or two in the mirk night, and then the morning in the land where the sun never sets; and I, too, shall see Him face to face. It's a bonnie world, and I fain would have looked once more upon the spring trees, and the gowans in the grass, and the faces I have loved, and oh—" the groan would not be suppressed—"Frank, my son, my son."

"He will come back!" she cried, her tears dried, faith and hope illuminating her face; "he will come home when he hears, and we will take care of you together. We will be

eyes to you, he and I. Oh, it will not seem so sad. Frank will read to you, and write for you. Think what a grand scholar he is—so clever and quick, and you know what a pen he has. Was there ever any one who could write brighter letters or report things more clearly in just a few words? It will grieve him to hear, poor Frank; and yet how glad he will be to fly home again! As for me, I will try to be wise, and notice all the little things you have taught me to see—the ways of the birds, and the coming of the flowers—so that you may not miss them. I wish I had paid more attention at school and had not refused to learn Latin, then perhaps I might have helped you a little with your book; but, with Frank at hand, what will that matter? He loves books, while I can only take care of the outsides of them with a duster. Do you remember how we used to laugh, and say he must be your secretary when he grew up? And now the time has come."

Her voice was still murmuring on—words of consolation and hope and cheer—when I found

myself outside the house, tiptoeing still—though my footfall could not reach the two in that inner room—with a hanging head, and a shamed sense of dishonour. Yet since none need ever know I had been witness to that moving scene, or be hurt by my alien presence, I would not have missed it. Ten years of social intercourse—of meetings in the market, and handshakes, and exchange of polite civilities at wa' teas—and I should not have known Miss Gillespie as I knew her now, who had never so much as spoken to her.

And with the thought came the sharp after-sting—

"If Sutherland loves her, she is worthy of him."

At the gate, going head down in my blind fashion, I nearly ran against him.

His "Hallo, Fowler! You here?" startled me into attention.

"Anything wrong?" he asked anxiously.

I pulled myself together, and remembered the errand I had come on.

He frowned meditatively.

"I'll go as soon as I can," he said; "but I must look in here first. It's a good thing we chanced to meet; it will save me a good long tramp."

"I have been waiting," I said, forcing myself to tell him so much; "the person who opened the door seemed to expect me. Of course it was a mistake; but I didn't like to make a disturbance by explaining."

"She took you, most likely, for a fellow they were expecting from Edinburgh, about his book. He was writing a commentary, poor old man. He'll never finish it now."

(So that was the task "Frank" was to accomplish.)

"Is there no chance for him?"

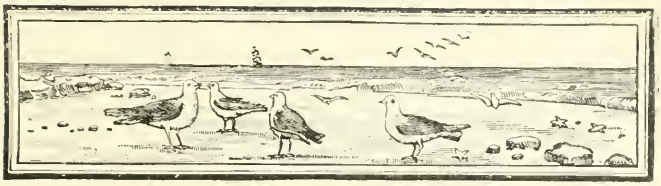
"None—atrophy of the nerves. I've foreseen it for some time, and Aitcheson last night, when he saw him, confirmed my judgment. I left it to her to tell him——"

He seemed to forget me, as he stared before him. She was nameless in his thoughts already; of all the women who flitted in and out of their pastor's sick-room he saw her alone.

"Cowardly perhaps—" he roused himself—"but women have the art of softening most blows and making them bearable. Well, I mustn't stand here gossiping. Don't wait dinner for me; I'm certain to be late."

We parted, and I took my uneasy secret home with me. It was mine, my own possession, and since it revealed her as all womanly, tender, and good, why should I be ashamed even though I had stooped to steal it?

She was worthy of Sutherland, but the knowledge, surely to rejoice at, gave me no pleasure. For the very qualities that lifted her to his plane made her the one whom I, too, could have worshipped had there been place in such a life as mine for love of woman. But there was none.



CHAPTER VII.

IT chanced that I had been able to render a trifling service to the poor woman who was paid to minister to Mrs. Laidlaw's whims, and be the butt of her ill-humours and spites, so that when next I encountered her in Shaw Street, trotting meekly beside the bath-chair, her timid recognition of me justified me in lifting my hat.

"Who's that?" demanded the lady in the chair, with an imperious sign to the chairman to halt. "Mr.—What d'ye call him?"

"Mr. Fowler, ma'am," said Miss McAlister, a round little dot of a woman, with a frightened face and a mouth always open for surprises. She spoke in a piping voice, like the overgrown child she looked. "I told

you, ma'am, if you remember, we met in Mr. Mackie's shop, when I was getting the peppermint drops, and I had forgotten my purse, and this gentleman—— "

"You would forget your head, McAlister, and expect somebody to bring it home in a poke to ye, if it weren't attached to your body," said the old lady, with contempt. "So you're the companion," she looked at me with her beady black eyes; "or is it the patient?"

"As you prefer, madam," I said, resolved to show myself finely indifferent to her satire.

"They tell me lunatics are the most profitable investment, or is it inebriates? There's a heap o' them hereabouts. We call them drouthy folk."

I professed myself unable to inform her.

"Nairn could tell," she said with a chuckle that shook her double chin. "Ay, ay, Nairn kept a private Bedlam when first he came here. Shawbridge was too healthy then for a doctor to thrive on his neighbours' complaints, so he filled his house with 'resident

patients'—that's the genteel way they put it; and if ever a poor soul of them was cured, it was no thanks to his keeper. But it's a meeserable generation I've lived to see, an' I doubt na, your young friend will find plenty to make his experiments on."

"I understood that you were anxious to consult him yourself," I said, making a sally into the enemy's camp.

"Hoots, do ye take me for a lameter because ye see me hurled in a wheel chair?" she asked, not without good nature. "It's my carriage, young sir, and a cheaper than keeping horses to eat their heads off. Andrew Souttar costs me less than a coachman, and walking exercise is good for McAlister; she's feared she'll grow too fat." The poor little woman blushed a distressed red to see her little weakness thus dragged forth to light. "So, yon little bit body you sent to see me, your niece, was't, or your cousin? thought she was securing a fine patient for the young doctor lad! McAlister will tell ye I'm never ill——"

"Except once," murmured the conscientious attendant, "when you had a threatening of gout."

"Ay, and ye thought it was all by wi' me; but I've taken my own way living, and I'll take my own way dying too," she triumphed. "And a good thing for you, McAlister; for what would a feckless, thouless, fushionless woman like you, do wanting me? And now, for all his drugs and his bottles, Tom Nairn's down himself, and will never walk a step again. And six good years younger than me. A fine commentary on his skill. What think ye, young man?"

I might have answered with some platitude, but she gave me no time.

"What have ye done with the wee wifie, Mrs. Carnegie?" she asked. "A bit genty thing—and no' upsetting, all things considered. I told her to come back again."

"Her husband carried her off suddenly."

"And you let her go?"

"We could not have hindered her. She's an excellent wife."

"I dare say—I dare say, from your point of view," she said dryly. "I would have managed him better;" and, truly, I believe she would. Think of Colonel Tom, with Mrs. Laidlaw for a partner!

"Well, and what have you to say for yourself, Mr. Companion? Don't ye know that I'm the principal person in Shawbridge, and that a' body calls on me?"

"I couldn't imagine that a visit from me would afford you any particular pleasure, madam."

"Ye mean that it wouldn't give *you* any particular pleasure to come," she said shrewdly.

I laughed; for there was a twinkle in her eye that seemed to promise the possibility of a truce after all.

"Come to-morrow—three o'clock," she said; "and McAlister will pay her bill to you—fourpence-halfpenny. Mackie would charge you sixpence, the greedy body; but he knows better than to expect it from me."

"This was the beginning of my acquaintance with the tyrant who ruled us all. She

was pleased to take a passing fancy to me, and was very frank when I went, as commanded, next day.

"I'll no' offer you any tea," she said. "I'm too old for newfangled ways, and forbye, tea's bad for the digestion and the nerves. It was wine in my day; but young men don't drink wine now either—their heads are no' made to stand it."

"I dare say we should if we had all a finely-stocked cellar."

"So you've heard about my cellar? Oh, you'll hear fine stories about me! I'm the richest and the nearest woman in the town. You see I know my own character! But they come, for all that, though some of them hate me, and some are feared of my tongue. Now, I wonder which you'll be?"

"Not afraid of you, certainly," said I, falling in with her humour. "Why should I be? I'm a very inoffensive person; I have had no tragedies in my life. We were very well content, my friend and I, to live retired and unnoticed."

"Retired and unnoticed, indeed!" said she, with a shake of her capstrings. "I know fine what young men are; and if you are to be so unco' humble and meek, how is your friend, the doctor, to live? Tell me that! He's no' above taking a fee when he can get it, I'll warrant; but unless he's a fool, he'll no' wait for it to drop into his mouth like a ripe plum off the wall. There's Nairn's practice, d'ye say? And how much of Nairn's practice would he have been like to get but for me? It's no' the earl at the Castle that's here to-day and away to-morrow, nor yet your Free Church minister, nor your minister's daughter, that can make or unmake a man in Shawbridge—it's me, Jennet Laidlaw."

She looked at me as if she expected me to challenge this statement; but I had no opinion to offer, and perhaps she took my silence for acquiescence. It was certain she was a force one had to reckon with if one would live in peace.

She questioned me in the openest manner about our *ménage*. A man and a lad to

wait on us, and a charwoman. Set us up! What did our butcher's bill amount to? We ought to deal with Jamieson; his meat was a penny the pound cheaper. What did I do with myself, since I professed to know nothing of housekeeping? Read books! She expressed as frank a contempt as I sometimes felt myself for my idle way of life. That anybody who had even a little money should not want to make it more seemed to her inexplicable. She favoured me with an outline of her own history, and impressed upon me that there was no pride about her. She was the daughter of a Glasgow merchant and the widow of a manufacturer, who, but for her energy and foresight, would have been a poor struggling laird all his days. But though she was the queen of Shawbridge, all her subjects were her equals when they met in her parlour.

We were alone on the occasion of my first visit with the exception of Miss McAlister, who sat behind a high screen, and who must have heard a good many sarcastic remarks

directed at herself. The screen perhaps hid some homely needlework as well as poor Miss McAlister's blushes, for when the little woman emerged, as she often did, to fetch or carry for her mistress, her shabby bodice was stabbed with pins. More than one visitor was turned away that day from the doorstep, an honour I ought, perhaps, to have appreciated more than I did, had I not been witness to the shafts that sped after their departing steps. Their turn to-day; mine to-morrow. Would they have gone so confidently had they heard their dear friend's candid opinion of them? Portly Dr. Gillespie, for instance; but then it is consoling to reflect that he would never have recognized his own portrait. The self we see and the self others see in us, have they one feature in common?

"Do you know his daughter?" she asked me suddenly; and when I stammered out that I did not, she looked at me searchingly.

"Keep out of her road, then," she said, "or you'll be fancying yourself in love with her. Nancy Gillespie's a proud peat, and thinks no

man good enough for her; she'll end by finding herself hinging forsaken on the bough. Men are fools, but until they're created different, women have got to thole them, or play the old maid."

Mrs. Laidlaw was so kind to me and so full of questions and advice that it amazed me to think she had rested satisfied for nearly a year without making Sutherland's acquaintance or mine, but on the occasion of my next visit I was to have my lesson in a woman's fickleness. She gave me but one fat finger to shake; the room was nearly full—the company mostly men, though some few ladies were present. There was a rather significant silence when I entered—perhaps it was my own little history I had interrupted? Mr. Little, the banker, started forward and shook me so effusively by the hand that I couldn't help thinking he had been betraying the very modest state of my balance. A paltry two hundred pounds a year! How does the creature live! To be sure his coat is rather glazy at the seams; but look at the books he buys!

I found myself supporting an angle of the wall furthest away from the throne and the courtiers round it, with Charlie Nairn for my companion.

"I say," he whispered, "are you in disgrace too? She asked me to tea on Sunday, and I suppose I ate too much. I meant to have a tuck in before I came; but she didn't give me a chance. She nabbed me coming out of church, and made me walk home with her, and listen to McAlister reading some rotten old book all afternoon. Did you ever hear old McAlister read aloud? It's an awful joke. She's pulled up every second word and made to repeat it as if she was a kid. I got off by saying I had a sore throat; but she paid me out. 'If you've got a bad throat, Charles,' she says, 'you'd better not eat so much'—there wasn't bread and butter enough for one, let alone three—'you'll be turning feverish, and your uncle can't attend to ye now. McAlister will give you a dose of the mixture before you go home.' My, ain't she an old screw! She would like to feed us on the

medicine she gets out of my uncle's surgery for nothing. I made McAlister pour the beastly stuff down the sink. You can always get round *her;* but the old lady found it out, and I'm in her black books yet."

"What makes you come here—a young lad like you?" I asked.

Charlie looked at me with surprised disdain.

"What do *you* come for?" he demanded. "You go to church too—I saw you!" He seemed to be lost in wonder that, having absolute licence to do as I liked, I should choose the disagreeables of life. "I'm in Laidlaw's mill; she knows to a halfpenny the miserable screw they give me, and would cut it off if I stopped away from church, or didn't come here reg'lar when she sends for me. Oh, it's all very well for *you!* I wouldn't darken her door if I was that lot." He looked with frowning contempt, in which I was subtly included, at the group round the chair. "It's her money they're after; but she won't leave one of them a halfpenny. I b'lieve she'll order it

all to be buried in her coffin just to spite them!"

"Let's make our escape," I said, "and come home with me. I like my cup of tea, though Mrs. Laidlaw assures me it is bad for the digestion; and Burton always allows me cake when I bring a visitor."

Charlie looked tempted, but his gloom immediately returned upon him.

"It would be no good. She'd see us."

"Well, and if she did? She can't keep us prisoners; and if, as you say, we are in disgrace—though Heaven only knows what my offence is—the sooner we let her see that we don't care the better."

"All right," he winked, "let's cut!"

So, by a skilful strategic movement we found ourselves safely out of doors.

This device, or the excellence of Burton's cake—Burton was once a boy, with an appetite to appease—probably tempered Charlie's opinion of me, for he favoured us with his society pretty often; but I found it more difficult to re-enthrone my own self-respect, for though I

had very little esteem for Mrs. Laidlaw, I, too, had my purpose to serve in toadying her. But it was not her money I coveted.

One day I had my reward—rather dearly bought, perhaps, by a good many variations of climate from heat to chill in Mrs. Laidlaw's reception of me. It was the turn of the Arctic regions, and in that desolation Dr. Gillespie, of all people, was my fellow-traveller. Surely it was not often the bland, invincible Doctor had to suffer such banishment? He button-holed me as if glad to find even so poor a companion in exile.

"You and I meet here often, Mr. Fowler," he said, "and yet we do not improve our acquaintance"—he had never bestowed more than two or three words on me before. "As our hostess has so many to engross her to-night, we shall commit no serious breach if we take our leave. If you have no better engagement, will you walk with me to the Manse, and let my daughter offer you a cup of tea? I am not a book-worm, like you; but there's an ancient volume or two on my

shelves that are perhaps worthy of your notice."

The Doctor, however, more valiant or more diplomatic than I, would by no means consent to slip away unperceived. He made his farewells with unabated courtliness, and when Mrs. Laidlaw, after snubbing him all afternoon, asked innocently—

"What's taking you away so soon, Doctor?" he answered.

"Our young friend here has kindly consented to accompany me home."

"Oh, you're expecting a friend, are you?" she says, staring at the middle button of my waistcoat, as if she saw the wall-paper behind it. "And you're going home to look after Nancy? 'Deed, Doctor, it's the young men, your visitors, I would look after if I was you. Miss Nancy is very well able to take care of herself."

"She's a—little difficult," said the minister, mildly, hooking his arm within mine when we got outside—"a little uncertain, but an excellent woman in the main. Suppressed gout, I believe."

"Unsuppressed bad temper!" said I, gaily. What cared I for her ill-humours and spites since I had gained my end? I didn't need to go begging hat in hand for subscriptions, or to wrest repairs from an unwilling heritor. My one fear now was lest Miss Gillespie should not be at home; but when we had loitered a few moments over the doctor's book-shelves, which held no remarkable treasure, he proposed an adjournment to the garden, and there we found her. She sat under an oak tree that cast a strip of shade over the little lawn, though it was scarcely yet in full leaf, and when she rose to meet us I was struck anew with her height and fine carriage. Her eyes looked frankly into mine, as she said—

"I am very glad to see you."

"Mr. Fowler is Dr. Sutherland's friend," said the minister, quite superfluously; there are not so many strangers in Shawbridge that she could mistake me for any one else. "We met at Mrs. Laidlaw's; and he came with me on the strength of my promise that you would give him some tea."

"But I didn't require to be bribed," I protested.

"Mrs. Laidlaw disapproves of tea," she said, with a little smile; "but she hasn't managed to convert my father to her views yet."

"She considers her conversation refreshment enough. It has some tonic qualities."

"Wholesome and nasty?" she said lightly. "I'm afraid I do not love medicine of that kind; I am not good enough to take it without making a wry face."

"Indeed, it would be better if you went sometimes to see our friend, my love," said the minister, seating himself in a garden-chair and watching the approach of the tea-tray as it was borne by the housemaid; "the young ought to defer to the old."

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment. Was she thinking the old ought to earn respect before they exact it? There was another, far-travelled in the vale of years, to whom she gave the whole devotion of her heart, as I, who had no right to know, could

have testified. But she had a smile for her father.

"Do you think it would be good for me to be snubbed?" she asked merrily. "Snubbed people are often nice, certainly. Mrs. Laidlaw goes upon that principle with all young women. We ought to have belonged to her generation, when girls said prunes and prism every morning to keep their mouths a pretty shape for the rest of the day; and did and spoke and thought just what they were told. Can you imagine a meek and mum Mrs. Laidlaw, Mr. Fowler? The girl was scarcely mother to the woman in such case!"

"She has grown a good deal since then,' I said; and we both laughed as we would have laughed at anything, the day was so bright and genial, the tea so good. The minister ate muffins with a zeal that left him half heedless of our talk, which rambled over many subjects. Her face, which had worn a shade of sadness when we came upon her under the tree, was now quite bright. But always at the bottom of my heart lay the uneasy

thought—if she speaks of Sutherland, what revelation shall I read there? I dreaded yet longed for the introduction of his name: at last I could bear it no longer, and blurted out—

"You've seen a good deal of my friend and comrade, Dr. Sutherland? He has told me of your devotion to his patient, Mr. Cunningham."

"Yes," she said, with a perfectly natural composure. "I have often been sitting with Mr. Cunningham when he has called. He has taken a great deal of trouble."

"The case interests him very much."

"It could not fail to do that," she said, with a simple conviction. "I have often thought that a doctor's constant contact with pain, and his habit of looking at the disease rather than the patient, must make it difficult for him to keep his sympathy alive and fresh. One looks to him to be strong, rather than pitiful. But such a calamity as blindness must touch every heart."

"It must indeed."

"Ah yes," said the minister; "poor Cunningham!—very sad. A little more cream, my dear."

"It is such a lonely world the blind live in," she went on, as if she had forgotten us; "sometimes one gets a glimpse of it when one wakens in the dark; it is not fear, as when one was a child, so much as an overwhelming helplessness. But Dr. Sutherland's presence has been a stay and comfort to his patient, I know. He has given more than mere medical skill."

"Sutherland has the best heart in the world," I burst out. The minister had strayed away to the gooseberry bushes, and we were alone. "Under a cold outside, he is all fire; he will never merge the man in the doctor. He loves his profession; but it has only made him the more humane. I who have known him since we were boys together, I can tell. I've seen him with his mother—a silly, exacting woman, whom many sons might have despised—but he never failed in his duty to her. He has

not met many women—perhaps never had one really good and noble woman for a friend—and men who live alone are apt to get rough and careless, but the heart within is pure gold."

Why I should have praised him thus I cannot tell, but that the impulse was upon me to set him right with her. Was it dread of my own disloyalty? I call it by no higher name.

She looked at me with some faint surprise in her eyes, as if she wondered at my vehemence; but her face lighted as she said with gracious warmth—

"He has no need of a woman's kindness who has such a friend!"

Her words disconcerted me. I could but stammer that I owed him everything.

"Perhaps he will have another story to tell!" she said, with a smile.

My praise of him may have pleased her after all.

"He is very clever, isn't he? That is such a good thing for Shawbridge. People's

energies here have only one outlet, and the rich have no time to look after the poor. Perhaps some one fresh—from the outside—would know better how best to help."

"Do you know Father Murphy? He comes to see us sometimes. He has ideas."

She said she had never spoken to him, though she had heard of his self-denial and devotion to his little flock. She glanced at her father sauntering back to us, his hands behind his back, as if he and a gooseberry bush had never so much as seen each other, and I gathered that the subject had better be dropped. It was not then known to either of us what a bad impression we had given of ourselves by admitting the priest, and shutting our door upon the Parish Pope. Indeed, but for his good nature, and the weakness he had for knowing everybody, the minister might well have declined my acquaintance. But he was too easy-going to bear resentment. He liked gossip of a harmless order, and he sat down beside his daughter and me, and talked of Tom, Dick,

and Harry, with the queerest little details and small items of news gathered during the day. Miss Gillespie had produced some knitting, and assented a little absently, I thought; she had known those people all her life, while to me they were but the merest abstractions—shadow pictures.

Before taking my leave, I made bold to ask her if she thought there was any service I could render Mr. Cunningham.

"It seems presumptuous, considering the number of his friends and the poorness of my acquirements; but I am an idle man, with much time, if little else to give. He is writing a book, I believe."

"A commentary," interjected the minister, "on the Epistle to the Hebrews. It will never be finished now."

She looked up quickly; but she said nothing.

"I've never written a line in my life; but books have been my chief friends."

"You are very kind," she said; "I know he would wish me to thank you. He is unfit

for work still; but later, perhaps—when he is stronger. He hopes to finish his book when his son comes home."

"What!" cried the minister, with energy not untinctured with disgust. "Young Frank coming home?"

"Certainly," she said, with a touch of haughtiness as it seemed, though I did not look at her. I had heard of this home-coming before, and the recollection shamed me. "Where should he be but here, at his own home, now that his father is old and blind?"

"The wish certainly does him credit," said the minister, dryly. "Have you heard when he is expected?"

"No;" she drooped, and the fire died out of her voice; "but he will write."

As the minister accompanied me to the gate, he hissed one word into my ear, "Jackanapes!" he said; and I knew that he was presenting me with his opinion of Mr. Frank Cunningham.

CHAPTER VIII.

AMONG the houses whose doors were flung wide open to Archie since he had effected that speedy cure of young Coventry was that of a very fine new mansion, built by a famous Edinburgh firm for Mr. Benjamin Green—one of the largest millowners in Shawbridge. Meddlesome persons hinted at an exceedingly humble beginning to all this prosperity, and Mrs. Laidlaw had been known to use this rumour effectively as a weapon, but nobody else cared, or perhaps could afford to care.

"We're all self-made," said Mr. Green himself, "except Templeton; and what have his fine family done for him? Sorned on him, sir, and despised him when they had squeezed

him dry. It's better to be whittled with your own knife than not made at all."

The workmanship was a little rough; it takes a generation or two to put on the polish, but Green Secundus would improve upon his papa, and Green Tertius might be quite a finished gentleman. That sort of thing goes on daily, and nowhere so fast as in manufacturing centres.

Sutherland got an invitation to dinner at Grove End the day after he had been seen shaking hands with the Earl under the statue of Sir Walter Scott. It was market day, and a good many people witnessed this exchange of civilities, and thought the more of the young surgeon for his promotion. Why not? Earls are not as common clay. There can never be more than a certain number of them.

"It's an easy way to pay his bill," said Sutherland, as he twisted the note into a spill and lit his pipe with it. "His lordship doesn't even need to give me an invitation to his own board when some more important person has disappointed him; he has only to be seen

greeting me in the market-place and I can get as many big dinners to eat as I want. You're included in this, Fowler."

"Are you going to accept?"

"I think so—yes," he answered, with rather an unnecessary amount of explanation—almost of apology. "I'm a bit curious to see one of these gorgeous interiors. Green is a patron of art; anybody can buy pictures if he sticks to big names and is willing to give long prices; they say he's had the good sense to leave the stocking of his cellar to skilled hands. I'm told he has some splendid Lafitte. Besides, there are six possible patients in the six Miss Greens."

"Any more reasons?"

"No;" he laughed a little consciously. "I wish I could promise you a splendid library, Fowler, as an special inducement, but the taste for books never seems to be acquired till the second generation. The other day when I was called to Spooners, the only visible literature was a red-plush album."

"Well, it matters less, as I'm not going,"

said the comrade, who had a hundred reasons for staying at home. He had never possessed a dress suit; had not assisted at a party since he went in a short jacket and round collar, and brought home pocketed spoil. "Crackers have ceased to be a joy, and even the mottoes have lost their virtue as poetry. Go alone, old man; the society upon my shelves is more to my taste than that of the six Miss Greens, who would only alarm me. What have I to say to girls? They make me feel a fool."

"Not an unwholesome experience. Besides, there are some women you get on with."

"Mrs. Laidlaw, for instance!" I had again in these last weeks been restored to that capricious lady's favour.

"And a younger than Mrs. Laidlaw," he said significantly.

Our thoughts flew simultaneously to the Manse garden. Once and again I had gone there, sometimes to find the minister alone, but, as the tea-hour approached, Miss Gillespie would be seen coming from that other Manse by the brown field-path where the gowans and

buttercups bent to let her pass. She was not always unaccompanied; what more natural than that a busy doctor should seize a five minutes' rest and a cup of tea before resuming his rounds? Could he have read in my face as he found me under the oak where the cups were spread, that it cost me a pang to resign my place to him? I had ill-schooled it if he did.

Needless to say, he overruled all my scruples.

Grove End was a very fine house indeed, set on the slope of the hill above the railway, and well away from the belching smoke of Shawbridge's tall chimneys. The steep face of the hill had been boldly terraced, and from the little wayside station, we humble toilers on foot ascended by quite a long zig-zag before the glories of the mansion burst upon us. A hired fly from the Dragon—which had come by the proper avenue—was drawn up at the door, and from it there stepped a lady and gentleman whom we both instantly recognized as the minister and his daughter.

"Did you know she was to be here?" I asked quietly. He confessed, with a half-abashed laugh, that he did.

"She's not like other women, Fowler; her friendship is worth cultivating."

Her friendship—was that to be my share? And his?

We were received by Mrs. Whittlemore—a sister of Mr. Green, who, from time to time, deserted her own hearth to look after her motherless nieces. She was a large woman, a little blindingly glaring in her dress and manner—like a gas jet without the shade on.

She received us graciously, her bracelets jingling as she shook hands, and immediately carried Sutherland off to introduce him to the other guests, while I was left to share the hearth-rug with her brother, who was good enough to give me an outline of his history, letting fly facts at me as if they were bullets.

"My fam'ly's had a better chance than ever I had," he said, for he had the honesty not to be ashamed of his origin. "*I* had to learn myself everything I wanted to know, but it's

all been paid for and put in to *them*. There's a French Madam in the house now, to speak parley-vous with them, but my sister won't have her at table—says her foreign popish ways put her out."

"Ah, and who instructs the young ladies in English?" asked Dr. Gillespie, who had joined us, wishing to be politely conversational.

Our host turned upon him with a growl that made the good doctor jump.

"Their English, sir, they learn in the parlour"—he pronounced it porlour. "Have ye any fault to find with it?"

"Certainly not—certainly not, my dear sir," said the Doctor, hastily. "I was merely thinking that possibly—I heard of a tutor the other day, an excellent creature, whom it would be a kindness to employ. He was destined for the Church."

"A sticket minister!"—with scorn. "I dare say he would count it a fine down-sitting to step in here; but maybe he'd be teaching my bairns more than I bargained for."

"The conjugation of the verb amo, for

instance," said the minister, taking the matter in very good part; "well, you must expect they will find instructors in that art whether you will or no, Green, such charming young ladies as they are."

"I've a son too, and a sharp 'un, worth all these trash o' lassies," the manufacturer turned to me; it is my belief he was not quite certain what the minister was driving at, and had no wish to confess the same. "He's at Dr. Dysart's Academy. You've heard of Dysart?"

My reply was cut short by the sound of the dinner-gong. The drawing-room had looked imposing even in the soft light of a June evening, but the dining-room surpassed it in splendour. Even a vulgar mind can scarce spoil a room in these days, when good taste can be secured at little outlay; vanished are the hideous crystal, the overflowing epergnes of old, the barbaric chandeliers, formless sideboards, the back-breaking chairs; harmony, dignity, beauty are to be had at a price, and the manufacturer had paid royally for them.

Perhaps he was happier when he sat down at a deal table to a slice of the joint with his homely wife to wait on him, and there is surely something not unpathetic in the sacrifices a man will make, and the strange things he will endure for the sake of those who are to succeed him. Mr. Green enjoyed nothing of his grandeur, except the thought that he had earned it to bestow upon his children. He was never known to use one of his many carriages, and at his own table passed all the made dishes, dining frugally upon the fish and joint; he had no appreciation of the wines which he circulated freely among his guests.

The elder Miss Green, newly emancipated, fell to my share, and I was curious to see what circumstances had made of her, but she was not to be drawn out. Never, surely, was so silent, so shy a girl. Did she like the country? She thought she did. Of course she often went to Edinburgh, or even to London: perhaps she preferred the town? She didn't know. Her loud-voiced aunt at

the head of the table, her silent father at the foot—for he only spoke by fits and starts—seemed to paralyze the girl.

"Are you always as quiet as this?" I asked at last, in smiling despair, and she answered with a blush that she was afraid she was.

"If you wouldn't mind talking, I could listen," she said. "Aunt Maria is looking at us."

Why Aunt Maria should particularly look at us was a mystery, but Miss Green's nervous distress made it impossible to refuse the odd request; was she, too, a sufferer from undigested wealth? She was rather a pretty girl, with dark hair and eyes; but she seemed to keep a continual watch upon herself lest she should offend some unwritten code—and her uneasiness laid its constraint upon others.

Far different was it at the other side of the table, where Sutherland sat at Miss Gillespie's side. I had done no more than shake hands with her in the drawing-room, and the intimate loud talk of the remaining guests — manufacturers and their wives —

prevented any syllable that fell from her reaching me.

But only to look at her animated face was a pleasure. She wore a gown of black with a soft lustre, satin perhaps, that clung to her like a sheath out of which her fair throat and head rose flower-like. It was open but a little way at the neck, but her white arms were covered to the wrist with black lace. The effect was virginal, charming, like an old picture, one would say, except that so many old pictures are hideous. Her hair was brushed from her forehead, rippling in a high sort of wave, and twisted in a loose knot behind: that, too, was a fashion of the past, for Miss Green, whose gauzy dress was surely a recent importation from Paris, wore an elaborate fringe, and a loop behind which might almost have served as a handle to lift her by. Miss Gillespie was not talking much, though now and then her humorous mouth broke into smiles, but with such a listener who would care? There is a great difference in silence; as practised by Miss Green it

depressed me, whereas its apparent effect on Sutherland was to animate him. Never had I seen him more gay, more energetic.

My companion grew slightly more easeful as the long meal drew to an end, and she found me less formidable than she had imagined. Yes, she played a little: she was very fond of music; she liked it better than anything, she thought, unless—unless reading—but when questioned as to her favourite author she shrank back confused.

"Your aunt isn't looking," I said, trying to reassure her; "and even if it should be Zola, I won't tell! I understand you read French?"

"Oh, but only dry things, like Corneille and Racine," she said, "and some of Molière's plays. Do you"—she twisted a gold bracelet nervously round her thin wrist—"do you know many literary people?"

"I know a few who write books." (I am afraid the distinction was lost upon her.)

"Do you write yourself?" she returned.

Why this harping upon the profession of

letters? Could it be that Shawbridge nurtured a budding novelist or poet? Poet it must be; one of the long-haired order who write for the future. Miss Green was not more than nineteen.

"No, I am a mere reader of other people's productions. One of the humble outside public——"

Mrs. Whittlemore cut the conclusion of this sentence short by giving the signal to the principal lady, and my companion fluttered away nervously from my side. Poor little girl! how much happier she must have been before papa and mamma became so grand! She was caught too late, and now she is for ever trying to forget all she learned before she was fifteen, and to remember all the things she has acquired since, and between these contending forces she is crushed.

What we talked of when the ladies left us, matters very little; it is always shop of one kind or other, wherever you go—politics, finance, trade, the learned professions—and it is never quite so wise or so profound as women

imagine when we decree their banishment; it used to be uncleanly enough upon occasion, once on a day, but, thank heaven, we are all dull and decorous now.

The drawing-room, where we presently migrated, was now softly lit with candles, each shaded by a crimson hood. The French governess was putting a good deal of soul into a nocturne of Chopin, thereby stimulating talk, for Shawbridge recognizes this as the sole end of music, and encourages its young ladies to carry their "pieces" about with them in neat bead-work rings when invited to tea or dinner.

I slipped into a window-seat, where little Miss Victoria Eugénie Green, in a white frock and blue ribbons, condescended to share her picture-book with me. She told me that she and her little sisters had watched at the pantry door for the ices, and "My, weren't they cold!" said the little maid. "Beatty didn't dare to eat them, for they give her toothache, and make her cry—which do you like best, the pink or the white?"

Presently there was a movement in a group

near us, and Miss Gillespie came to our corner. Miss Green was with her.

"I won't sit, thank you," she said. "Sophia and I have had a great talk over the Sunday school library, which wants to be fitted out with new brown-paper great-coats, and now I must speak to Mrs. Baird. I came to ask you if you still have leisure and inclination to help Mr. Cunningham?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure."

"Even an hour every morning?"

"Two or three hours—as long as he likes."

She hesitated, then lifted her candid eyes to mine.

"You remember I told you about his son, that he was coming home?"

Sophia Green withdrew her arm from Miss Gillespie's, and sat down by the little sister on the window-seat.

"I remember." It was six weeks ago. I could not tell her how often I had wondered why the young man still delayed.

"He has been detained," she said, the faint colour coming and going again as quickly;

"his work has hindered him from leaving town. He is a journalist, you know."

"Indeed, I did not know. It's an exacting profession."

"Yes, I believe so; he hopes to come soon. And in the mean time it would be good for Mr. Cunningham to work a little; he has so much time for sad thoughts."

"I'll go to-morrow. Perhaps if I were to call at the Manse first, you would be good enough to go with me and introduce me? I don't suppose he has ever heard of me?"

"Oh yes, he has!" she smiled. "You forget that Dr. Sutherland is there almost daily, and he, too, knows how to value friendship. Ah, Sophia, they are looking for you to sing."

"I don't want to," cried the girl; "I can't!" She hid her face in the little sister's long flaxen hair.

"You silly!" cried the child; "Mademoiselle will make you!"

And sure enough a crook of Mademoiselle's finger, and a nod of her sleek black head

were sufficient to draw Sophia forth from her retirement to her allotted place by the piano, where Mademoiselle was already playing the accompaniment.

"She sings so charmingly," said Miss Gillespie, with generous appreciation. "How I envy people who can speak through music!"

"You don't sing?"

"No, nor even play beyond the poorest strumming. The fairies were in a niggardly mood when they met at my cradle; they gave me the love of music, and kept the executive power for somebody else."

"Still, you had the best of that bargain."

"I am greedy enough to want both!"

There was no envy in the pleasure with which she listened. Miss Sophia's singing justified her praise; if her voice had no great compass, it was singularly sweet and true, and it had an odd, searching quality of pathos that redeemed the foolish sentimentality of the words she sang—"Farewell, love, for aye, love." The whole tragedy of parting was embodied in the sighed-out notes. Where

had the girl learned the trick? Was it merely some inherited quality, trained till it became an art, or had she depths of feeling in her that found here their only outlet? It says something for her power that those nearest the piano listened in silence, broken only by a loud whisper from Mrs. Whittlemore.

Really, she imparted to her neighbour, considering what had been spent on Sophia's music, there was uncommonly little to show for it; "anybody could sing a simple ballad like that without any teaching at all, and Sophia needs as much pressing as if she was a public character, whom it pays to say no."

Clearly there was war between the loud-voiced aunt and the silent niece; Miss Sophia kept the breadth of the room between herself and her relative, and would scarce talk till two of her younger sisters were set to thump out a duet. She kept hovering round Miss Gillespie with that adoration young women often feel for one of their own sex before they have wakened to the stronger passion. I saw them both talking to a stout old lady in

bugles, while I was doing my best to respond to Mrs. Whittlemore's comments. Sutherland, who had been persuaded to join the card-players, saw them too, or one of them at least, though he played just at well and as coolly as ever. He is to be envied his power of doing two things at a time.

The card-party, however, was to be ruthlessly broken up not many minutes later. While the girls, their backs to the players, stood gossiping with Mrs. Baird, a cheery old lady who was every one's friend, one of the candle shades in the sconce above them caught fire, and at a gust from the suddenly-opened door the burning fragments fell between them. In an instant Miss Sophia's gauzy skirt was alight, but almost before she could scream Miss Gillespie was kneeling on the floor crushing out the burning sparks with her hands. Sutherland was the first to fling aside his cards, and rush forward; the room was all in confusion, Sophia sobbing hysterically, and everybody talking at once. Mrs. Whittlemore announced that she felt sure she should faint;

but nobody took any notice of her, and she probably thought better of it. Sutherland sent me for his bag, which he had left in the hall, intending to go on to a case after leaving Grove End. I collided in the doorway with Mr. Green, carrying a bedroom ewer in each hand, and leaving a watery track behind him in his haste. We all lost our heads, I suppose, but the panic subsided somewhat when it was ascertained that Miss Sophia was quite unhurt, and that she and her sisters were only crying from fright. Sutherland advised Mrs. Whittlemore a little curtly to send them to bed.

"Will you allow me to look at your hands, Miss Gillespie, please?" he said, in a tone of authority. She had been standing silent in the middle of the commotion, her back to the wall, her hands behind her. She was very pale; but she flushed when he spoke, and tried to smile as she turned to her father, and said reassuringly—

"It really isn't anything, dear."

* * * * *

Sutherland went home with her and her father, who was quite unstrung. When Green learned the true state of the case, I think he would almost have given Miss Gillespie half his fortune. It seemed to distress him that he could do nothing but order out the easiest carriage, and fill it with cushions and rugs; but he had the good sense, at Sutherland's hint, to expedite her departure, and hurry her away from the babble and chatter, and praise. Pah! it sickens me yet to think of those poor, scarred hands, as it will touch me for ever to remember the dignity and patience of her face.

Though it was still early, the party was completely broken up. Being the only humble individual who went on foot, I took leave at once; others, dependent on their carriages, waited in resigned impatience their arrival.

I was making my way towards the opening in the shrubbery, by which the track led down hill, when a window at the end of the house was softly unlatched, and I heard my name called. Turning back, surprised, I saw a figure at the French window, which opened on to a terrace,

and, the night being serene and clear, easily recognized Miss Sophia. She was wearing a dark morning dress, and her eyes were red-lidded with much crying.

"Mr. Fowler, you seem kind; you—you didn't laugh at me to-night for being so stupid, and I thought I might ask you a favour; will you post this letter for me?"

It seemed rather a small request after such a preamble, but why should Miss Sophia, who could surely command her father's entire staff, choose me as her messenger?

I suppose she saw my hesitation.

"It's—it's nothing wrong," she stammered. "Indeed, it's the *right* thing to do, though it is difficult. I wrote it since—after poor Nancy saved me, you know."

Now, I don't love mysteries, and, fatherly as she imagines me, and as I am to Miss Sophia's youth, I would prefer to keep clear of confidences. But if this were, as I supposed, an effusive outburst of thanks from one girl friend to another, it would be the height of absurdity to make a fuss.

"Of course I'll post it," I said cheerfully; "you may depend on its disappearance in the first pillar-box I come to. And now wouldn't it be safer for you to go in? You ought not to risk catching cold after the shock you have already had to-night."

"Yes, I will shut the window. Thank you very much."

There was a post-office on the outskirts of Shawbridge, and remembering my promise, I stopped to fulfil it. As I took the letter from my over-coat pocket to shoot it into the slit the gleam of a lamp fell clearly upon a name written in Miss Sophia's round school-girl hand, "Frank Cunningham, Esq."

CHAPTER IX.

I DID not, of course, expect to see Miss Gillespie when I called next morning at the Manse; her father, whom I found wearing a plaid dressing-gown, and seated at a late breakfast in his little study, told me she had passed a restless night, and suffered much pain.

"It has upset me sadly," he said. His air of suffering was so well sustained as to be quite convincing (but he replaced the cover on the bacon-dish, perhaps to conceal the fact that it was empty). "But I am forgetting. You will let me order some fresh coffee for you? My housekeeper is one of the few women who can make drinkable coffee."

"Thanks, but I breakfasted two hours ago."

"Ah, you must not imagine I am always such a sluggard," he said, with a pensive smile; "but, naturally, my dear child's condition kept me anxious, and my rest was much broken. I am habitually an early riser. The morning hours, as you, a student, scarce require reminding of, are the golden hours."

My studies were no more profound than his own, and equally little required special rules of life; but it is difficult to tell a gentleman to his face that he is a humbug. That portion of the table which was not occupied with the breakfast-tray held a few books; they were the same I had seen on my first visit to this little room, and then, as now, there was the dust of disuse upon their tops. The muffin-dish reposed upon a pile of yellowing manuscript, creased and much fingered at the corners.

"You are looking at my tools, I see," said the minister, intercepting my wandering glances. He spoke quite pleasantly, with that big, bland manner that sat so well on him. "You see me in my humble little workshop."

He lifted the muffin-dish, and placed his hand upon the papers. "A reserve stock," he explained. "When I was a younger man I had a zeal for sermon-writing, perhaps to the neglect of equally important duties connected with the ministry. Do you believe in the efficacy of preaching?"

"That must depend on the preacher and his subject, must it not?" I answered lamely. "There are sermons and sermons."

"And there are hearers and hearers!" he retorted. "To live in a country parish alters many of one's earlier views," he said plaintively. "Personal influence—a social gift, goes further than pulpit eloquence. One soon learns that it is folly to preach above the heads of one's audience. One has to come down to their level."

Judging from the specimens I had heard, one would suppose he had not very far to descend; but, in a civilized society, rude remarks are forbidden.

"Yes—yes, it's a mistake to aim too high," he continued. "One's flock likes best that

you shall say what they themselves might have thought. It makes them feel clever."

He smiled at his own shrewdness; but surely even the most accommodating congregation must have grown weary of assent in the years during which that pile of sermons had done duty?

"Now, our dear friend," he indicated, with a backward wave of his hand the Manse across the fields, "has made that mistake—a man of great weight and learning, but with no kind of popularity. Of course, from my position, it is impossible that I should be one of his hearers; but I gather from what my daughter tells me, as well as from the evidence of my own eyes, that his adherents are fewer than they might be."

It was not in reason, perhaps, that he should wish Dissent to flourish under his very nose; but need he have worn that look of resigned pity when he spoke of his neighbour's failure?

"Perhaps," I said, "Mr. Cunningham holds that 'the reach should exceed the grasp?' Some unworldly people do."

"But heaven is not with us yet," he said softly.

To my mind it was far indeed from the warm little room redolent still with the odours of an excellent meal. There was a ham and fish, as well as the bacon; the marmalade had ousted a concordance; buttered toast usurped the place of the inkstand. It was typical of the man who mouthed at old sermons year after year, but was punctual at dinner-parties, and imposing at christenings and weddings.

There was very little need for him to tell me that Mr. Cunningham shared none of his cheap social triumphs. The principles for which men marched out from Tanfield Hall, homeless and churchless, had taken no deep hold in Shawbridge. 'Tis an easy-going place, not ambitious of being too good, preferring religion of the silver-slippered order; and Mr. Cunningham's followers were consequently limited. His was a nature of deep spirituality and great simplicity, but he was a student rather than a man of affairs. Odd stories

were told about him—how he had gone to Edinburgh to get a new coat, and had spent the day and his money book-stalling in the byways of the town; how, on a rare occasion, persuaded to dine with a neighbour, he had, instead of smartening his person, put on his night-gear and gone to bed—laughable but lovable lapses to those who knew the man.

Failing Miss Gillespie, I had meant to ask her father to walk over with me to the Free Church Manse, but thought better of that decision. I was in no mood for more of his society, finding it less easy than usual to take him humorously. Few grown-up people are amiable in the early morning hours; the day and one's spirits mellow together. I was rising to take leave when an ejaculation from him checked the intention.

"Dear, dear!" he said, "it is—yes, it is Mrs. Laidlaw!" He glanced with dismay at his dishabille. "My dear young friend, if you could intercept her, while I make my toilet? Pray meet her at the front door, conduct her to the drawing-room or the dining-

room. Make my excuses; tell her I hope to be with her in a moment."

He took me by the shoulders and propelled me gently from the room, turning the key in the door and pocketing it. His plaid skirts had barely whisked round the corner of the stair—he went with wonderful agility for so big a man—before the bath-chair was drawn up at the threshold, and Mrs. Laidlaw and I were confronting each other.

I delivered the minister's message.

"And what are *you* doing here?" she demanded.

"Possibly I came on the same errand as yourself."

"And how do you know my errand?" she asked sharply.

"I don't know it."

She looked as if she could not quite make up her mind whether I was a fool or merely pretending to be one.

"Well," she said, "I didn't come to sit at the doorstep and be glowered at by the likes of you."

"Let me help you out."

"Ay, you may help me out and help me in too. McAlister," she turned to the little woman, who had been trotting to keep pace with the chair, and who now came up, panting and breathless, "you can bide out here, where you won't be in the road; but don't let me catch you sitting in the machine again!"

As there was nowhere else for her to sit, unless, like the heroine of the nursery rhyme, upon her thumb, I lifted one of the oak hall chairs on to the gravel path, Mrs. Laidlaw viewing this trivial act of courtesy with mighty good-humoured scorn.

"Now, you come in here with me," she said, leading the way into the drawing-room like a warder who expects the prisoner to follow, and taking possession of the sofa. It was the first time I had seen her walk, and her vigour was amazing. "Shut the door. The minister? Toots, do ye think I don't know him and his ways by this time? I know fine what a slug-a-bed he is, the breakfast dishes are no' cleared in the study yet:

I saw them through the window as I came by. Let him take his time; he'll come in as pawky as ye like, and pretend he's been with Nancy. Now, you just tell me what happened last night. I'm a plain woman, mind, and I like a plain tale."

Thus conjured I stood before the inquisitor and gave her a veracious account of the accident.

She listened in silence, then nodded her head, dryly.

"Ay, Nancy's a clever lass."

"Miss Gillespie's a very brave woman."

"She didn't burn her hands for nothing," she said sarcastically.

"No, she did it to save Miss Green."

"Pooh! and how much do you understand of a woman's motives?"

"Are they so different from a man's?"

She seemed to think her questions ought to carry as much weight as a statement, for she condescended to no reply.

"So she got the doctor to gallivant her home last night?"

"I never said so," I cried weakly.

She brushed aside the evasion with a fat hand.

"He went of his own accord, if it pleases ye any better," she said grimly; "and he came again of his own accord to dress her hands this morning, and *you* come of *your* own accord at eleven o'clock to ask for her!"

"Perfectly correct. And Mrs. Laidlaw comes of her own good will at 11.30 on the same kind mission."

She looked a trifle disconcerted; perhaps she was not accustomed to have her deeds judged so charitably; but she rallied immediately.

"Never you mind what I came for," she said. "I never looked to meet you here, that's certain; but, since you are here, there's a point or two on which you can satisfy me."

"I have told you everything that passed. The incident was very simple."

"And the consequences are like to be very simple too," she mimicked me.

"I trust so. The burns are superficial.

Dr. Sutherland hopes Miss Gillespie's hands will soon heal."

"And then?" she queried.

"And then—we shall all rejoice."

She extinguished my light-mindedness with a snort of contempt.

"A woman can only marry one man at a time—mostly she finds one enough. Which of ye is it to be—you or the doctor?"

"Is it decreed that one must marry?" I asked. "This is rather alarming. May not a harmless bachelor, a stranger and an orphan, exist in Shawbridge? Has anybody fallen in love with me? It is very kind of you to warn me, for, you see, I'm not a ladies' man: I've no social graces or parlour tricks. I'm sure I shouldn't prove at all domestic. I'm not even a ratepayer."

She read my face keenly; I flatter myself she saw nothing there I wished to conceal.

"Then it's the doctor," she said. "I thought as much."

"Dr. Sutherland has reposed no confidence

in me," I replied; "and the few young ladies I have met in Shawbridge have been equally reticent. I am not quite so young as I look, Mrs. Laidlaw, and I have found it a good rule in life to burden myself with as few affairs of my own as possible, and with none at all of other people's."

"Pooh! you may try to throw dust in my eyes, but they can see as far as most people's," she retorted. "And let me tell you, Mr. Companion, when a woman makes up her mind to marry to her own advantage, it's not your convenience or mine, or your wishes or mine, that will stop her."

"I am quite sure," I answered, "that if you made up your mind to ask my hand in marriage, I should be obliged to consent: so, please don't. It wouldn't be to your advantage."

She laughed, and I was restored to her good graces.

"Maybe it would be to yours, though," she retorted. "Ye might do worse, my fine young man, though I say it."

Well, possibly. There is always a conceivably lower deep than any one has pictured, even when in the clutch of a nightmare. I think she was explaining to me how rich she was, and how little of her wealth she managed to spend, when the door opened, and the minister entered. He was beautifully shaved, and most correctly dressed, and his very handshake was a benediction. Delightful minister! How glad I was to present him with my gridiron and make my escape.

Miss McAlister remained in possession of the gravel path and of the hall chair—a small monument of patience, with expectant mouth and folded hands; Andra', the chairman, greatly daring, was smoking at a little distance, a ragged glengary cocked over one eye; the other bent on the door. She jumped up when she saw me.

"Is it true that Miss Gillespie is ill?" she whispered. She listened agitatedly while I explained.

"Then, it wouldn't be good for her to see any one," she said. "She shouldn't be dis-

turbed. Couldn't you prevent any one from going upstairs?"

But I had no relish for more of that kind of business; and, even as I shook my head, her face fell.

"It is too late," she said, shrinking back.

It was too late. The minister was even then piloting Mrs. Laidlaw upstairs. It had taken exactly two minutes to mould him to her will.

The present chronicler could not, of course, follow them there; but many things in this little story were made known to him at a later time.

"My dear," said the minister, when he had received permission to enter his daughter's room, "I have brought you a visitor to cheer you in your solitude; and, since I know it is not good for you to see too many people at once, I will place this chair near you for our good friend, and leave you to have your chat."

Nancy was seated by the open window, which afforded a pleasant prospect of the garden and orchard and the fields beyond.

She turned a pair of grave, surprised eyes upon the visitor, who came in large, confident and smiling. There is a binding law which forbids you to be discourteous even to an enemy if he seeks your hospitality. Nancy wondered if Mrs. Laidlaw would prefer the window shut?

Mrs. Laidlaw professed that she liked the air.

"And what's this you've been doing to yourself?" she asked.

"I suppose papa has told you?"

"Ay, and more than papa. It's no' often a body gets the chance to play the heroine in Shawbridge. You're in everybody's mouth, my dear, and I just thought I would get Andrew to hurl me up here once errand to hear ye're own version of the story."

"There is no story to tell," said the girl, a little proudly; "the fire was out in a moment; there never was any danger."

"Eh, but we'll not spoil a pretty tale by being overly modest," said the old lady, nodding her head with mysterious intent;

"folks are saying ye risked your own life to save that silly quean's, Sophia Green; ye may as well take the credit when it comes your way. An' 'deed ye've been clever enough to bandage your hands, I see; so long as ye keep the clouts on, nobody 'll be any the wiser."

Nancy stared in amazement. Then she laughed—a genuine peal of amusement.

"I suppose you think I'm shamming," she said; "trying to secure a little cheap notoriety."

"Well, and I wouldn't be the one to blame ye—even if you hadn't a better reason."

"What reason?" Nancy asked haughtily.

"My dear," said Mrs. Laidlaw, with a fine assumption of sympathy, "I'm an old woman, and I've seen the world"—when people use that phrase they usually mean the bad side of the world—"and I know that a lass, when she has no tocher to look to, must do the best she can for herself. Your father's no very wise, Nancy; but you're clever enough to be your own father and mother both, and

no' miss a good down-setting when it comes in your road."

"What do you mean?" asked Nancy, white-lipped, and with angry, steady eyes.

"Hoot, toot, there's no need to put on airs with me, my woman, or to flyt at me; I tell ye, I think it's small blame to ye to catch a braw lad when ye have the chance. It's little enough the minister will leave you, and you're no' the woman to work when ye can get others to work for ye, Nancy Gillespie. Is't true that the young doctor has given up attending on old Richard Cunningham?"

"And if it is?" said Nancy, defiantly.

"And if it is," she repeated, "why shouldn't ye foregather with him here? Ye can play the patient if ye cannot any longer play the nurse, and maybe it will serve your turn better. There's many a chance lost in this world for want of a little boldness; but you've an auld head on your young shoulders, and need no teaching of mine. Shawbridge folk believe in your burns, my dear, and they'll

get no enlightenment from me. Just keep the bandages on, and you'll take them in, fine ; they're mostly fools."

Under an attack so bold, so brutal, Nancy found her righteous wrath wither into contempt. To be angry with such an adversary would be a debasing condescension, derogatory to dignity.

"I suppose," she said, after a silence, "it would be useless to tell you that you are mistaken."

"'Deed, an' I think it would," rejoined Mrs. Laidlaw, with an awful good humour ; "unless ye've fixed your mind on the other one."

"The other one," the girl murmured, as if the words were forced from her. She steadily averted her gaze from the window, where one could trace the brown track that led to the Free Church Manse ; for a moment it seemed as if her secret were to be brutally dragged from her, and trampled under this scorner's feet.

"Ay, the other one," Mrs. Laidlaw repeated; "but I give ye credit for a bonnier taste,

Nancy, than to take up with yon auld maid of a companion I left down the stair. The doctor's the better man and the better match."

Nancy breathed again.

"Does it give you happiness to think such things?" she said, looking strangely at the horrible, wicked old woman who looked back at her with unwinking boldness. "Were you ever a girl that you could believe another girl would stoop to so base a calculation? But, whatever you may choose to think of me—I care very little for your good opinion—I forbid you in future to connect my name with that of either of the gentlemen you have mentioned. They are my friends, and they shall not suffer if I can prevent it—I forbid you—do you hear? Yes, I am young, and you are old; but you like to hurt and injure people, and so I have a right to say you shall not."

"Upon my word! You're no' blate, Nancy Gillespie."

"No," the girl assented firmly, "I am no' blate, where my friends are concerned."

Mrs. Laidlaw laughed. She had accomplished the mischief she desired to work, and what cared she for a girl's anger?

"If ye had a little more sense, ye would see that I was your best friend," she said; "but ye need fear neither meddling nor melling from me. Play your own game, my dear, in your own way, and I'll be the first to clap my hands if ye succeed. Success pays, as I've a right to know. 'Deed, if ye think better of it and will condescend to accept an old woman's help, ye shall have it and welcome. Come to my work-party on Thursday, and I'll see that ye have an escort home again. With opportunity, a clever woman can do what she wills."

Mrs. Laidlaw had organized a society for clothing the poor with flannel petticoats; like some other charitable people, she was content to do her good deeds by proxy; she linked the affluent and the indigent, herself contributing nothing save the use of her room and the benefit of her comments. Nancy had persistently refused to countenance garments

made under such auspices; she had no new answer now.

"Well?" said Mrs. Laidlaw, interrogatively.

Nancy looked down at her white bandages.

"Eh, but I clean forgot your injured hands!" the old woman laughed. "They won't be better?"

"They won't be better," said Nancy, steadily.

"And if they were, ye wouldn't come?"

"I wouldn't come."

"Then I must e'en leave ye to your own devices. I'll be going my ways, now, or Andra' McPherson will be charging me an extra sixpence for keeping him waiting, the unconscionable creature! Good-bye, my dear; *take care of your hands*," she chuckled maliciously. "And I wish ye good luck with the doctor. I'll be hearing of ye from him since you're too ill to come out yet."

All the way home she was in a mood of exuberant good nature, laughing once or twice so unaccountably as to make Miss McAlister

jump, and laughing again at the effect of her unholy mirth.

"I've put a spoke in Nancy Gillespie's wheel," she whispered to herself. "She thought she could defy me and treat me like dirt—set her up! She was a fool to go conter to me if she wanted to marry the doctor!"

"I am sorry," Dr. Gillespie was saying, as he stood in his daughter's room—he looked out of the window rather than in her face—"that you cannot get on with her. *I* find no difficulty; she requires a little humouring—a little tact. A valuable quality in a minister's daughter. But I'm afraid you have no tact, Nancy."

"I'm afraid not."

"You might consider me," he went on peevishly—"my position here. She is the richest heritor, and you know how difficult it is to get her to consent to even the most necessary outlay. Besides, if she were thwarted, she might be a—rather—dangerous person."

"Only if one had a bad cause," said Nancy, looking up at her father wistfully.

"If you had chosen," he went on, with the persistence of the weak, ignoring her remark, "you might have been on good terms with her; a young woman should not find it so very difficult to defer a little to an old one, even if she is not very—even if there are some little things one would prefer altered in her."

Nancy, looking out of the window, smiled faintly.

"And now I am afraid you have incurred her enmity."

"Yes," she assented, "I suppose we are enemies; but the situation might have been worse."

"How so?"

"We might have been friends."

CHAPTER X.

TO leave Mrs. Laidlaw's society for that of the blind minister was like passing from the buffetings of the Bay of Biscay to the tideless shores of the Mediterranean. Tideless shores; for he had left the bustle of life behind him. Whatever of anxiety, of sharp struggle he may have known had but heightened the triumph of conquered peace.

As I went by the high road I met an anxious-faced young cleric hurrying along with a shiny black bag in one hand, and knew that he had come from the Manse. One such presented himself Sunday by Sunday, courting the suffrages of the congregation, and in the Manse pew, a shepherd's plaid over his knees, sat as listener the man who for forty years had

ministered to his flock, and would teach them no more. And, of all men in the kirk, the least critical he, who knew the most.

"Is he sound in the essentials?" "Is he safe on Moses?" Through this ordeal had each candidate for the vacancy to pass; but whatever he suffered at the hands of the people from their pastor he had nothing to fear.

But it was merely a question of an assistant. The elders refused to accept Mr. Cunningham's resignation; when he was stronger he would preach again. Nor would they permit him to vacate the Manse. Perhaps the hope buoyed him up too, for he was always calmly cheerful. It was easy to know him, and easier still to love him. He received me with a great deal of kindness, and made far more of my trifling services than they were worth. He was infinitely patient with my blunders and slowness in finding the references he needed. We began by going over and making a fair copy of that portion of his work which was so far completed, and often

when I paused to puzzle out a phrase—for he wrote in the minutest of scholarly hands—he would eagerly supply the passage from memory. My task was mainly clerical, for with the original text I could help him but little. On fine mornings we worked in the garden. An old woman, thirty years in his service, would lead him out to the bench under a thorn, which had been crimson a month earlier with double blossom, and would settle him there with a kindly but peremptory touch or two. Woe betide him if he let slip the plaid across his knees, or neglected the tumbler of milk placed on the little table at his elbow. His lean form, and pale, delicate, spectacled face—he wore his glasses out of old habit—became a part of that summer world for me. He knew every flower that blossomed within a wide radius of his seat, and before we began our task he would ask whether this or that were yet in bloom. Often when he could not distinguish a specimen by the smell he would recognize it by the touch. He smiled at my blundering descriptions. Never was such an ignoramus as I.

"I am the No Eyes of the moral tale," said I. "I suppose it comes of drifting about from city to city, with never a little corner of one's own to cultivate."

"You must get Nancy to teach you. She knows every flower by its everyday name; I could never get her to be the least interested in gardeners' Latin."

"I think I understand that from a woman's point of view. You drop a friend's title when you get familiar. It's too ceremonious; it sets up a barrier."

"Yes; and she is all womanly. She is a dear daughter to me. She and my son were playmates."

It was the first time he had spoken of his son by adoption; but our acquaintanceship was scarce a week old, and why should he confide in me? Nevertheless, I had often enough thought of the mysterious Frank Cunningham since I posted that letter Sophia Green entrusted to me. Why should she write to him, and why should Miss Gillespie look anxious when she spoke of him? One morning I

arrived early, before the minister had been helped downstairs. I was arranging some papers on the writing-table of the study when the old servant came to me.

"He's no' sae weel the day," she said; "but he'll be down the now."

"Perhaps in that case I had better leave?"

"Na, na, bide whaur ye are. It's a ploy till him, the writing, an' tak's his mind aff himsel'. He's fair wrapped up in thae weary books, an' blithe as he is to hear the birds at their morning lilt, the scart o' the pen's a dearer sound."

"I'll see that he isn't over-tired; I can be tired myself, you know."

"Ay, dae that. It's weel ye've a puckle sense; but it's no' you that should be at this wark." A shadow fell across her face, and seemed to harden it.

"I'm only here till somebody better turns up."

"He that should fill the bairn's place'll no cast up till it pleases him," she said, with bitterness. "Train up a child, an' awa' he

gangs. Ay, I ken fine it's no' in the Bible, but it's the reading many a broken hert pits intil the auld proverb."

What was there to say? She went before I could frame a commonplace to meet the case. It was that same day he spoke of his son. He was soon tired, and we did not work long.

"I have made a beginning," he said. "If it is not given to me to finish, some one else may; if not, it will be because it is best. I had hoped that my son—but the old should not impose their tasks on the young; besides, he has his own life-work."

"He is a journalist, I think?"

"Yes; a fine career—next to the ministry the finest, I think. Rightly directed, the press may be as potent an influence for good as the pulpit—it reaches further," he said a little sadly.

It was clear that, in his innocence, he knew nothing of the methods of modern journalism, and it was not for me to enlighten him. He thought of the highway—the royal road of

literature, sunned and canopied by heaven; I of the slums and by-ways, the crooked alleys, the back doors. But better his belief than my knowledge.

"He lives in London?"

"Yes; his work takes him here and there, but London is his centre. London draws all the young and eager to it; perhaps in earlier days I might have felt its fascination too. I spent a week there once, in a street off the Strand."

"A lively enough spot, or near, at least, to the bustle."

"Yes; but you have heard of the loneliness of a crowd? I knew no one, and was glad to come back to my quiet haunts."

"The quiet places are good to come back to. Your son must find it a rest to come home."

He leaned forward and suppressed a sigh.

"It is only the old who appreciate rest," he said, with studied cheerfulness—"a chair in the sun, and a book, and we are happy; but when the blood is young, one wants a more stirring life. You are kind to an old

man in sparing time and taking trouble—you say that you like it, and that makes your help kinder still; but while you bend to me I cannot hope to be in any way your companion. I should be a damper on your pleasures; you read other books and think other thoughts, and how would the world grow if it were not so? A young lad should not be tied to the home apron-string; we are unwise when we fail to remember our own young desires for freedom. No, no, when I let Frank go, it was without repentance. I pray that I may not be selfish enough to call him away from his own work to help my little schemes — the world can get on very well without them. And Shawbridge would seem dull, very dull indeed, after London."

It was difficult to listen to this special pleading without prejudging and condemning the unknown son, who could desert such a father in his extremity.

"Come," he said, rising, as if he took my assent for granted. "I will show you his picture."

He walked erect with very little aid from me, seeming to know every step of the way into the house, and into that room where I had seen him lie upon his sick-bed. It was restored now to its special use as a sitting-room, dining and drawing-room in one, of this humble little establishment. Everything in it bespoke bachelor occupation; it did not attempt to be tasteful, scarcely even comfortable; 'twas plain to see no woman had ever presided here.

He paused before the mantelpiece and pointed upwards to a portrait that hung there as if it were visible to himself. The picture—a sketch in chalks—was that of a young man, some two or three and twenty at most, olive-complexioned, dark-haired, dark-eyed, with a curious sensitive, emotional look.

"Tell me what you think of it," he said, his tone implied that I could not but praise it.

"It is a clever face."

"Yes, he has good abilities; he will make his mark. An artist friend, with whom he lived for a time, drew it, and my boy sent it

home to me. I am no judge of such things; but it seems to me well executed."

"It strikes me as a faithful likeness." Indeed, there was a subtle something about the rough, unfinished sketch that breathed character.

"Some one is coming," he said, turning his sightless eyes towards the window.

His ear had been quicker than mine, but presently I, too, heard the fall of steps, and in a moment more saw Sutherland coming down the garden path with Miss Gillespie at his side. She looked grave and rather pale, and her hands were still bandaged; but she carried herself with the old ease. I watched the minister's face and saw it irradiate.

"Nancy!" he said.

She ran in by the glass door, which stood wide open, and resting her two arms on his shoulders, kissed him.

"Your bad penny back again!" she said gaily.

"And none the worse?" His tone was caressing; one understood that this man had

made a mistake in not qualifying as husband and father.

"Not a pin the worse!" she answered blithely. "I have brought your doctor to give me an equally good account of you."

Me she had not yet seen, but now discovered. She came forward with outstretched hand, while the old man turned courteously to Sutherland.

"I am glad to see you here," she said. "I hoped you would be. I used to watch from my window to see if you would pass down by the field-path; but I never saw you."

"No. I come by the high road, like the candidates with their shiny black bags—only I find my sermon—and a good one—waiting for me here."

She laughed.

"Has the favoured one appeared yet, do you know? I am behind the times, you see."

"So far as I can understand, the last one was considered unsound on Genesis; the one

before, I believe, gave himself airs; he wore the wrong kind of collar, or perhaps it was the shape of his boots that displeased."

"Yes," she nodded, "there's always something. They've been used to think their minister perfection, you see; that makes it hard for anybody to succeed him. How is the work getting on?"

"I'm afraid I must confess to being a very indifferent secretary."

"He will never discover it. He will think only of your kindness."

"That's the worst of it. His gratitude knocks the bottom out of one's conceit."

"Do you think it's good to be conceited?"

"It's an indispensable condition of happiness, at least."

"I don't know," she smiled. "I think that sounds rather immoral. Do you think you always speak the truth?"

"Who does? The sooner one learns to prevaricate comfortably the better one gets on in the world. Even in Shawbridge the art of disguising your mind comes in handy."

She looked at me in a quick questioning way, a little proudly too.

"If one has nothing to conceal?" she said.

"Even in that possible case some people require snubbing."

It was a clumsy way, no doubt, but at the moment I could think of no better to show her that she had nothing to fear from me. For I had seen Mrs. Laidlaw go upstairs to Nancy in her seclusion, and had I not unhappy experience of that inquisitor's methods?

She averted her glance for a minute, and her head was still turned away when she said lightly—

"One would think you had some crime on your conscience."

"So I have—heaps. But you're only a sinner when you're found out. I don't mean to be found out."

She seemed to gather that I was talking merely from the lips to set her at ease, for she made no reply, and in the pause between us the minister was clearly heard, saying—

"I brought your friend here to show him"—

like all blind people, he spoke as if he still saw —"the portrait of my son."

Sutherland looked up quickly to the mobile face above the mantelpiece. He had schooled his own face to express nothing. Suddenly he turned to Nancy—

"Is it a good likeness?" he asked.

She too looked at the picture—a long steady look. Her colour came and went; for a moment I think she forgot us. We watched her, we two; only the minister waited, with a smile.

"It—it is not good enough," she said at last.

The minister's smile broadened.

"Nancy and I think nothing and nobody good enough for the boy," he said. "We are a pair of foolish people."

"Nothing and nobody," she repeated, with a new light on her face. She went up to the old man and put a hand through his arm. The action seemed to say, "We are enough for each other; we want nobody else."

Sutherland's face kept its set look. He took his leave abruptly, pleading hurry, and, my own day's task at an end, I went with him.

We scarcely exchanged a word on our way home—perhaps he was interpreting the little scene in the way she meant him to read it—for who could doubt the intention of her words? If these failed to convince, her face carried its message plain to see. Only one emotion lights a face as hers was lit. To me it was all plain enough; as the one who had never had any chance, perhaps it was easier for me to understand. Nancy was a good woman. There are women—good enough in their way—meaning no harm, who count it no breach of honour to let a man offer them his all, even while they mean to reject the gift; takers of scalps these, who find a certain pride in their trophies, labelling them like the curiosities in a museum, "See the result of my raids!" Nancy was not of this order; she had guessed at Sutherland's secret—perhaps he had let some word fall in the many times they had met, or a look had betrayed him: women have an unerring intuition in such matters. Or it may have been that the cowardly old woman who had not dared to attack Sutherland, had

ruthlessly drawn the veil from the girl's eyes. She saw whither he was drifting, and put out a hand to save him a confession. Only a very single-minded woman, sincere and pure, can do this, forgetting self and the petty vanity of being possibly misunderstood. She wounded her own pride to save his—she bared her heart that he might read its fluttering secret and spare his own a pang.

He said nothing—being, indeed, very busy all the afternoon—till we were smoking together at night. Then he asked me abruptly—

"Do you ever hear from Davidson now?"

"When he has some new triumph to relate. He spares me his failures."

"Write to him and ask him what he knows of this young Cunningham."

"Do you want to know more of him? It seems to me his face tells one enough."

"There may come a time when we shall have to know more," he said bluntly. "I suppose Davidson isn't an absolute fool? He can be trusted to tell you what you want to know."

"In all matters literary he thinks himself

infallible. Perhaps he is—as nearly as they make them. He has completely mastered the art of being interviewed against his will. His own face grins at him from his own title-page: he knows to a fraction the value of the social paragraph—as a journalist he makes authorship a complete success."

"Then he's sure to know another of his kind."

"Why necessarily of his kind? We had a strong testimonial in young Cunningham's favour."

"Good people often believe in bad ones—to their ultimate sorrow. It's borne in upon me that I shall have dealings with that young jackanapes yet."

The same term of contempt that Dr. Gillespie had employed.

"You think it's quite fair?"

"My motive is good. I shan't move in this matter unless there's clear reason."

I wrote that night to Davidson—a diplomatic letter, trusting to his cleverness to read between the lines.

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN I went, as in duty bound, to call at Grove End—Sutherland is excused such social functions — Miss Sophia Green was not visible. As I was ushered by the butler into an ante-room, the sound of a piano in the adjoining drawing-room suddenly ceased, and light, flying steps seemed to hint at retreat. Mrs. Whittlemore, who was still paying her brother one of those domiciliary visits of inspection she undertook at intervals, kept me a long time waiting, perhaps to convince me of my social insignificance — possibly to make a toilet. In daylight she was almost as dazzling as by night; the effect seemed to be achieved by a lavish expenditure of cut beads; her

eyes and her hands were restless—two signs that black silk and jet were not her birthright. She received me with very modified graciousness.

"The young ladies," she said, when I asked for them—the phrase was her own—"were busy." She didn't approve of young girls, or, for the matter of that, of young men either, being idle.

I insinuated that idleness was only permissible in venerable persons like myself.

"I am sure you never have an unoccupied moment." The compliment was a large one; but she assimilated it gracefully.

"I try to act as a good example," she said, modestly; "and indeed, without boasting, I'm a great deal more active than any of my nieces. My brother's orphan children are a weight on my mind, Mr. Fowler; you'd never believe the worry they are to me; not that their mother could have done much for them; she was one of the thouless kind that would take three breaths to blow out a candle; but it's a thankless task to look

after other folks' bairns. If they go wrong, you're to blame, and if they do well, you get no credit. There's Sophia—you were introduced to Sophia, I think?"

She made it rather clumsily—this attempt at a fine lady's indifferent memory.

"I had that pleasure."

"To be sure," she said. "I remember now. You took her in to dinner. Well, what opinion did you form of her?"

"What does one ever think of a young girl except that she is charming?"

She smiled a little disdainfully.

"I don't find her charming; perhaps it isn't to be expected; she's like her mother—a soft bit of a thing, with a will you can't bend. But she'll have to please her father, or it will be the worse for her. How's the doctor?"

This abrupt transition left me with nothing to say but that he was well.

She accepted this satisfactory intelligence without pleasure. I had somehow the impression that more had been expected of me.

"He has, unfortunately, no time to make afternoon calls."

"Then we must persuade him to come often to dinner," she said, with renewed good-humour. "A busy man ought to take his enjoyment when he can. It stands to sense he can't always be at work. He's doing very well in his practice?"

It was a question rather than an assertion.

"He's very much interested in his profession."

"So I hear. He's been very kind to that old minister—let me see, Cunningham, isn't it?—about whom Nancy Gillespie makes such a fuss. A good girl, that, but a little vain—eh? She is a good deal admired."

"I can well believe it."

"She makes men admire her."

"Not a difficult task."

"You think so?" She laughed dryly. "It's a pity she can only reward one for all the devotion she gets, isn't it? And that the one you would least expect her to take,

you may depend on it; but women are fools when they marry—— "

"The wrong man."

"Exactly—the wrong man," she assented. "It's the duty of older people to see that they choose the right one, in spite of ingratitude."

What was it she wanted to make plain to my obtuse masculine perception? That I had better aim less loftily than at the rich man's daughter when on a wooing bent! Thanks, madam, but matrimony has few charms for me, and little Miss Sophia is safe from my machinations. Why can't women be honest? Why must they needs complicate the affairs of life with their finesse?

Presently, however, it became evident by the persistence with which she returned to Sutherland, that me she had not in her thoughts at all. She appeared to have been making successful investigations into his pedigree; but I disappointed her by being unable to give her any information about Lord Harrow.

"I believe he's some sort of relative—a Scotch cousin, perhaps; but, to my knowledge, they have not met for twenty years."

"It isn't the Scotch way to ignore one's own kith and kin—lords or no lords," she said severely.

"I will point out to Sutherland that he has neglected his duty. Scotch cousins—especially when they are lords—are to be assiduously cultivated."

She laughed.

"I could set him right on a good many points if I had the chance," she said, with entire frankness. "A man is blind to his own advantage without a woman to open his eyes for him. Oh yes, I know what you're thinking; but what's the use of being well connected, if it isn't to serve you in some way or other? If you've money, it's different. Money," she remarked to this penniless person, "opens all doors; but if you've none, why shouldn't your belongings give you what support they can?"

"A humble invitation shall be despatched

to Lord Harrow this very night, if persuasion on my part will avail."

"It pleases you to be sarcastic," she said, looking at me with condescending indulgence; "but there's sound common sense on my side. He must marry—a doctor hasn't a chance unless he's married."

"So several people have been kind enough to inform him."

"Oh," she said sharply, "I dare say he'll find plenty to tell him that, and to be ready with their advice too; but it isn't every girl a doctor without private means can afford to take as a wife. He wants one with some money to set him up comfortably, and if he can give her a certain position in exchange, things will be all the easier arranged."

"Sentiment is to have no place, then?" This large lady did not look as if she had married for love.

"Sentiment? Fiddlesticks! If it's love-making you mean, it's my experience that it thrives best on a substantial income. It may please you to think us mercenary—us women;

but when we give our money we like something in exchange for it—why not? It hasn't been easy earned."

That was not difficult to credit. Affluence sat on her like an ill-fitting frock.

"Call it what you like," she made me the liberal concession, "it's in our blood to barter; but if we like to see our money's worth, we're honest too, and stick to our bargain. My brother Benjamin began at the bottom of the ladder, and my husband wasn't a step above him; they've made every sixpence they possess, and, let me tell you, you know nothing of the value of money till you've earned it by the sweat of your brow. We're not more sordid than finer folks, but maybe we know our own value better."

"I humbly agree with you that wealth rather than knowledge is power nowadays," said I; "but surely it can buy a bigger prize than a poor country surgeon?"

"A doctor with a connection among the aristocracy can be anything he chooses," she said, visions of knighthood and royal patronage

floating before her eyes. "A consulting practice in the West End is as much as any girl need look for. I'm a mother myself, Mr. Fowler, and though I've no daughter, my sons have done well for themselves, I'm thankful to say. They didn't need to look for fortunes, but a grandfather or so doesn't come amiss—we've none to boast of ourselves," she said, with a jolly laugh; "so we're pleased to adopt other people's ancestors. Yes, my lads have satisfied their father and me, and having nothing more to do for them, I can afford to be interested in the fortunes of other young men. You're the doctor's bosom friend, they tell me, and if you want him to prosper, you advise him to look out for some nice girl with a snug little fortune of her own. There's more than one in Shawbridge I could name; but it isn't for the likes of me to be choosing for him."

She was honest enough now, offensively plain, in all conscience. Was this the true woman, or that other of the dinner-party who affected to be so offended at blunt brother-

Benjamin's allusions to a humble up-bringing? Probably each was true in its measure, for what woman is to be judged by one mood? Her drift was no longer obscure; little Miss Sophia was to be rescued from some entanglement which displeased the authorities, and married according to arrangement. She was rather pretty, and she had a more than pretty fortune—why shouldn't a poor professional man with nothing but a distant relative or two in Debrett to recommend him, be grateful for such a prize? If only we could mould our neighbours to our will, Sophia's fate might have been settled that same afternoon, and not unhappily perhaps; but who can control the passion we call love?

I thought of another woman who would fain have meddled with Sutherland's fate—were all the matrons of Shawbridge match-makers?—and casually asked my hostess if she knew Mrs. Laidlaw?

She had volunteered to show me the hot-houses, and we were standing in a steamy atmosphere, wherein gorgeous blooms ex-

panded in wanton loveliness, and exhaled an intoxicating perfume; she turned upon me sharply, and told me that she neither knew the lady in question nor desired to know her.

"An upsetting woman," she said, "with her finger in every pie. I keep out of her way when I'm visiting here; we've our own society in Glasgow, and I don't ask any better. It's good enough for *me*. I would advise you to have little to do with her either;" she dispensed some of that cheap counsel she kept ready in labelled packets to bestow on her acquaintances. "She's a mischief-maker, if ever there was one, and she'll get you into trouble sooner or later. That's the way she serves her friends; gets them to confide in her, and then turns round and betrays them—I call that low, if you ask me. Now, I'm different; when I take an interest in any one, I want to help them if I can. I tell the girls often I wouldn't be leaving my own comfortable home and coming here if it wasn't for my wish to do the best for them."

The tiled path between the banks of blossom

was narrow, and the lady was stout ; while she chose to harangue me I was her prisoner. I was alone sustained by the thought that so humble an individual could not possibly prove "interesting" in her eyes.

She spared me not a single house, not even the tropical one where palm and orange trees flourished ; she forgot her own sufferings in her conscientious desire that I should miss no single point of their glory. When at last I emerged, faint with luscious odours into the clean, reviving summer air, it was as a pioneer, laden with spoils from the Promised Land.

In the avenue I met Miss Sophia, a little sister hanging on her arm. They were hatless, and had the guilty air of escaped prisoners.

She greeted me nervously, and directed her gaze at the basket of grapes and bouquet of exotics.

"Did Aunt Maria give you these?" the little sister asked, with round eyes. "How fond she must be of you! she hardly ever lets anybody have a flower."

"It's not *me* she's fond of, little one. I am one of the spies. I am taking back these trophies to prove what a delightful place the Land of Canaan is."

Miss Sophia pouted.

"It isn't very nice to live in," she said. "Beatty and I would rather live in Shawbridge—wouldn't we ?—in a street where there are shops—and—and people to see."

"Better not. There's an old grandmamma there who sometimes plays the wolf to pretty Red Ridinghoods."

"That's a fairy story," Beatrice corrected me solemnly. "It's out of a book."

"And I've been hearing another fairy story which isn't in print yet—about a prince and princess. She was rich, and he was poor."

"Tell it me," urged the child, coming up and taking my hand.

"It isn't for me to tell, my dear. I shall never play the prince in any fairy story."

Miss Sophia tapped the ground with a little foot. Her colour came and went.

"No," she said, speaking timidly. "But

there's a knight in most stories, who helps the distressed people."

"The knights are all dead; they lie in the churches with stone arms crossed on their stone breasts. We've fallen on a prosaic age; I am no knight, Miss Sophia, but only a humdrum old book-worm, with a treacherous memory and a troublesome conscience."

She looked at me with such alarm and distress in her dark eyes, that I could not but reassure her.

"When a friend trusts me, I don't betray his confidence, but the postman is a safer messenger. It's his business, you see."

"I shall never trouble you any more," she said proudly; then her face fell back into sadness. "It—it was no use."

Poor little girl! Whatever her trouble, it would help her no whit to lean on me. Hadn't I been made to understand very plainly that I was only an ambassador, who is, after all, merely a superior kind of porter? "Influence the prince, and you will be welcome, but don't presume to affect that you

are a superior person yourself. *You* have no coronets or such merchandise with which to barter at our mart, our prizes are not for such as you."

Beatrice was clamouring for a tale when the elder sister plucked at her sleeve.

"I think," she said, in a frightened voice, "that Aunt Maria is calling us."

The little one started off, fleet as a hare. Miss Sophia took leave more sedately.

"Thank you," she said, "and *please* believe I didn't do anything wrong. But Aunt Maria is——"

Well, I knew what Aunt Maria was, so it did not matter that she left her sentence unfinished.

"And be sure you eat the grapes," she said, with a demure little smile, "for—I'm afraid you won't get any more!"

The fruit of Eschol consoled one of Sutherland's poorer patients, and the flowers died their appointed death in some corner of the house.

"Faugh! Stephanotis!" said Sutherland,

picking the bouquet up and throwing it down again. "Characteristic of the woman, isn't it, that she should choose that flower? The sort of person to scent herself with patchouli."

"Ungrateful! She sent them to you."

"Much obliged, I'm sure. I'll send the grapes, if you don't mind, to poor Betty Cooper. The flowers go into no sick-room. They'd make a hale man ill."

"Mrs. Whittlemore hopes you'll be induced to dine often at Grove End."

"I've gone there once, and you've done the civil thing by calling. You told her, of course, that I had no time for such dissipations?"

"No, I didn't. I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Because, if you wish to go to the Manse, you can find time."

It had to come; the silence between us was hurting us both. It was making a gulf that daily widened. He looked at me for a moment almost resentfully, a glow in his deep eyes; perhaps he thought he had kept

the secret that was so plain to read, and he was a man to resent any attempt to force his confidence. But if he held me overbold, he forgave me. God knows I thought only of him, crushing back my own pain. He put his hand up to his brow as if to wipe away his suspicions.

"Yes, I've gone; the more fool I."

"Don't say that."

"What have I gained by it? Nothing but an addition to pain. I'm awfully hard hit. You see her often; but you've never noticed her, I think."

"She's very handsome."

"She's perfect. I'm not sentimental, as you know; but I'll never think of any one else."

"Why not win her, then?" The words hurt like a knife.

"She's not to be had for the asking; you make her too cheap."

"Faint heart," said I, falling from sheer embarrassment into hopeless commonplace.

"It isn't a case of cowardice. A man is a

fool or worse if he can't ask the woman he cares for to marry him; if he hasn't pluck enough for that he deserves to lose her. It's that her heart is constant, and she has given it to some one else."

"You can't be sure of that until she tells you," I retorted, but without conviction, remembering the picture scene.

"She has told me. Do you suppose I would leave a stone unturned to win her if I could? I never thought to care for a woman. I don't know now how I came to care for her; but I think it must have been almost the first time we met by that old fellow's bedside. She was so heavenly good to him, and all without a thought of herself or me, or of anything but to soothe him. The women we meet at bedsides are not often like that. You wonder that we're cynical, we doctors, and sneer at the sex; but when they wear the nurse's dress and put on tenderness and devotion to further their flirtations—Faugh! his hospital experience makes a man ashamed to have had a mother or sisters. I suppose it was because

she's different from the women we've come across—more honest, more simple, more sincere. We haven't known many good women, Fowler."

"Not many."

"And so—but if you had cared for her you would understand."

"Perhaps." I hid the bitterness within. Why need he ever know?

"Well, as I tell you, I haven't a chance. I knew it before I asked her. You remember that day we were looking at that portrait of Cunningham's son? She never looked at me like that. Her face betrayed her. It's precious little use to rail because he's won and I've lost."

"You would have won if you had had his chances. He's known her since childhood."

"And since she thinks him good enough, what more is there to say? We'll burn that letter of Davidson's, Fowler, and hold our tongues about it, unless there comes a time when it will help her to act upon it. It was mean, perhaps, as you said, to pry into his

affairs behind his back; but when a man's your rival—— "

"You'll not stop going to see her? You'll remain friends."

"Friends! Can there be friendship between a man and woman when one of them has aspired to love? That wouldn't help her—would only get her talked about. I told her I wouldn't go again until—she sent for me. She's the kind of woman you can trust to claim your help if she wants it. She has no smallness or false delicacy. Oh God, why couldn't I win her?"

He loved her with all honour; but he could not mock his love by calling it friendship—pale, bloodless ghost, that makes strangled passion its boast. So he fought his battle between desire and wisdom, and dug an open grave for burial rites. She was young; her life's lot was cast with a man who was immeasurably her inferior in mind and heart and character. There were malicious tongues in Shawbridge that could sting. He did his best for her when he resolved to keep away. Perhaps he

was thinking of his own dignity too, with a proud man's desire to save it. Human motives are never unmixed. He had held himself so unlikely to surrender. Women he thought of as a class; woman he had never thought of at all. The wife he sometimes talked of was an abstraction, a phantom, a thing he must some day—so they told him—add to his household like the furniture of his consulting-room—important to his profession. He could not himself have told when the great barrier had been surmounted, and his heart had begun to throb at passion's bidding. Yet he was no celibate by instinct; I, who knew him best, knew that he was weak where he thought himself invincible—a man made for common fireside joys, chivalrous towards weakness, with hidden reserves of sentimentality.

And now he had given his all to one who could give him nothing back again.

Well, is it not often so? It seems at times as if an acquired desire should do everything for one; raise one on wings. Why should not a frustrated desire have lifting powers as well?

He used his strength as a strong man should to struggle for self-mastery. He schooled himself to a guarded unsociability ; patients spoke of him as cold, reserved, proud, perhaps, of his family connection—a very little good blood goes a long way in a self-made town. Men liked him because he did his work, and went his ways ; sensible women valued his skill, and thought him honest ; only the silly fools who make a profession of invalidism, hoping to attract and interest, found him curt and brusque.

In the autumn Shawbridge was visited by an epidemic of influenza. Sutherland hailed it as a war-horse the blare of trumpet.

After all, there was his work. Life is not all barren while one can be doing.

CHAPTER XII.

THE winter passed without event; Sutherland was very busy, for the epidemic took a severe form, and I saw little of him. He had patients in almost every house, except here and there where men were rich enough to send wife and children to some favoured spot unvisited by the plague. The earliest to go was Mrs. Laidlaw, for this bold lady who ruled us all was routed herself by the first whisper of disease or danger; she took herself, McAlister, and the Bath-chair to a seaside resort which made a boast of its low death-rate; her ragged attendant was left behind.

"It will be cheaper to hire than to pay your railway fare, Andra, my man," she announced; for, in spite of her panic, she had an eye to

her little economies. "And you'll find plenty here to hurl about, when folks begin to mend and are on their legs again."

For all that, she expected her old henchman to be at her beck and call when she returned, and doubtless he would obey without demur. Everybody obeyed her; but it would be safe to aver that no living soul missed or regretted her when she made her bargain with the cabman who carried her to the station, and disappeared for a time from Shawbridge.

Of gaiety there was little, and the few invitations that came our way were steadily refused. Sutherland was far too much occupied to dine abroad, finding it difficult enough to snatch a meal at home, and I had little inclination for any society other than his. When I met Mrs. Whittlemore one day in Shaw Street she acknowledged my bow with great coldness; clearly I was in her black books, and was held responsible for Sutherland's unaccountable delay in accepting the good things offered to him—the chief of these good things was sitting at her aunt's side in the imposing carriage;

she looked pale and listless, but she flushed a rosy red when she saw me. Poor little girl, she had found no knight yet to espouse her cause, and the process of being made, under the tuition of a sensible relative, to forget whatever romantic fancy she may have harboured in her girlish heart was clearly not a happy one.

The chief breaks in a life of comfortable monotony were my visits to the old minister; these were still paid regularly, though I had ceased to go as his secretary. Slowly, and not without much pain, bravely hid, he had realized that the completion of his book was impossible without more skilled help than he could obtain in Shawbridge. Whether, had he been able to give it to the world, it would have added much to the sum of general knowledge, I know not; to him it had been a labour of love, a consolation in distress, a refuge from sad thoughts, but, by a coincidence not unfrequent in the kingdom of letters, it so happened that a book on very similar lines was published about this time by a Nonconformist divine, whose name carried weight. We would

have kept the knowledge from him, but by some chance he heard of it. He was eager to question me when I called; Nancy Gillespie was with him. We looked at each other with vexation. What fool had blundered?

But his nature was too sweet and sound for jealousy. It never seemed to occur to him that we had expected him to show annoyance.

"Hardinge is a great authority," he said; "in his hands it is a piece of work well done, without a doubt, though there may be minor points on which we should differ. I should have felt—unworthily, perhaps—a little hurt to know myself superseded by one less able than Hardinge; but all men must bow before his knowledge, and so, perhaps"—he spoke with a fine dignity and a pathos that was moving too, turning his face from one to the other of us as if he could read ours—"it is as well my little effort should die stillborn. We think our place cannot be filled, but there is always some one who can take up the unfinished task and bring it to a better conclusion."

What was there to say? Nothing. Nancy put out a hand and laid it on his, folded on the top of his stick. These two required no words.

He was eager in his surmises about the book —how this passage had been interpreted, what view the theologian had taken of such and such a point; and, seeing him too large-natured to be hurt, I commissioned Davidson to send me a copy and all the press notices he could get hold of. In the mean time, with Miss Gillespie's connivance, it had been found possible to get the completed sheets of his own book set up in type, and the first proofs came by the same post as the parcel from town.

By happy chance when on my way to the Manse with these, I saw Nancy crossing the field-path; the pasturage was bare and brown now, and the path was spongy with recent rain. She looked a thing of freshness and life as she came along, alert in avoiding the puddles; the first mysterious, indescribable touch of spring was in the air, though not a blade or leaf showed sign of having heard the call to awake;

only her youth and her health responded to it.

"A regular Slough of Despond, isn't it?" she said brightly, giving me her hand; "but it's so much shorter one is tempted to sacrifice one's boots."

"I'm glad you came this way, for I might have missed you if you had come by the road. I've got these proofs."

"Oh, I'm glad! I thought something pleasant was going to happen. It's in the air."

"You must give them to him."

"No, you; it was your surprise."

"I couldn't have managed the thing without you. Besides, he'll like it better coming from you."

"We'll do it together," she said, as gaily as a child. Then she caught sight of my other parcel.

"It's Dr. Hardinge's book," I explained; "I wrote to a friend for it, and he's sent me one or two reviews of it as well. I'm unregenerate enough to be glad that one of them is tolerably disparaging."

"I don't think he will feel like that," she

said a little doubtfully. "I believe it will give him pleasure to praise it."

"Yes; but since he hasn't any common, natural little weaknesses himself, we may be allowed to indulge in them for him. I'm ready to swear, before I open it, Hardinge's book isn't a patch upon his."

"Of course I like to think his is best," she said; but her voice had lost its gaiety.

As we walked up to the door together she said, with a visible effort—

"You got your copy very quickly. Perhaps it was an early one? I wrote for one too, but—it hasn't come."

"I dare say mine is a press copy," I said quickly. "Davidson reviews all kinds of books; theological ones too, for all I know. He's a lazy beggar, and wouldn't have taken the trouble to send it so soon if he hadn't had it at hand. We'll say nothing about it to-day, and your copy will be sure to have turned up by to-morrow."

"But, when you have taken all that trouble——"

"I want to look into it myself. Besides, one surprise is enough for him at a time."

She acquiesced, perhaps unwilling that I should guess too much, while my one desire was that nothing in voice or manner should betray me. For I knew to whom she had written, and why he had not replied.

With the packet had come one of Davidson's scrawls, containing scraps and tags of news of writing folk, who make a little world of their own and think it of a deal of importance. In a postscript he said—

"That young fool, Cunningham, is going as straight as he can to the devil. Why don't his people look after him? Not that it would be much good; he's too far on the down-grade to be pulled up, short of shutting him up in a lunatic asylum, and the law doesn't touch his kind of madness, worse luck. If there's an able-bodied, cool-headed, hard-hearted member of the family you might give him a hint; but don't you send his mother, or his sister, or his sweetheart on his track. He's not a pretty sight, and he's past a woman's influence."

And to see her look at me, with those clear candid eyes, full of a wistful trouble—no, she, at least, should not be sacrificed. Let him go

if he would into the hell of the hopeless; such as he, daring to claim a woman's love, and with no manliness to keep it, are not worth the price of a tear.

She forgot her uneasiness, perhaps, while she was with the old minister; they were like a pair of children together, she delighting in his delight, as he felt with his slim finger-tips, already growing expert, the smooth surface of the printed slips, the colour bright in his hollow cheeks, his blind eyes strained wide. Something akin to the joy of fatherhood must a man feel in seeing thus the birth of his mind's toil and labour, and in knowing that he has given a gift to the world. It was easy to slip away and leave them absorbed in each other; easier still to deceive her guilelessness. That same afternoon Davidson had a peremptory telegram to send a second copy of the learned divine's work from town, addressed to Miss Gillespie at her father's Manse; the poor little trick was worth playing if it gave her an hour's peace.

And having embarked on a course of deceit,

I gathered boldness with practice. Of Davidson's letter no word was said; indeed, that fine composition, with its little epigrams and those well-turned sentences which had doubtless done duty in some more public capacity—for Davidson does not waste his material—went to the back of the fire and was reduced to harmless tinder before Sutherland came in. He looked fagged; a winter of unremitting work had told even upon his strong nerves, and now that the stress was over he began to show his fatigue.

"I've been thinking," I remarked, "that I want a change of scene; I would say a holiday, but for your polite derision. You wouldn't admit that I work."

He smiled sombrely, looking into the fire.

"I don't know that. Idleness would be to me the hardest work of all."

"Then I am suffering from that form of pressure. I'm ill."

He glanced up sharply—his physician's glance, keen and penetrating.

"You do look seedy."

"Of course I do. Did you ever know me look anything else? I've been too long in Shawbridge. You must take me away, Archie."

He lay back in his chair and looked at me humorously.

"You're not so bad as all that, you know," he said; "but I don't mind if you do engage me as travelling physician for a week or two. I suppose you thought it was time I pulled up, and this innocent ruse is the result? Well, one can't work for ever. Let's go and see if we can't manage to play yet. Where have you set your mind on going?"

"Anywhere, so long as it's a big place. London for choice. Shawbridge is a suffocatingly little hole; you can't lose yourself for half a minute."

"London then. It's as good as one can get at the end of February; we can try Paris if it fails us. You must give me ten days; the work is slackening, and by that time I shall be able to leave things in Rutter's hands. Black will look after the serious cases."

Changed times since the force of example had compelled even gentle-natured Black to turn his back on the upstart aspirant. Sutherland had succeeded to Dr. Nairn's comfortable practice, and was now making a better income than he cared to spend. Rutter was a fourth-year student of promise, whom he had engaged during the winter as unqualified assistant to help in the surgery. He spent his days dispensing—a silent, awkward young fellow, intent on his work and on saving enough to qualify. Sutherland had arranged that he should sleep out. To my companionship he was accustomed. Sometimes we scarce exchanged six words a day, and neither of us ready to misunderstand the other's silence; but he was in no mood for the irksomeness of a third at our board. He had fought and frowned his trouble into quiescence, but the iron restraint he imposed on himself made him easily irritable over little matters. The lines on his strong face had deepened. I, who, with my sickly air, had always been taken for his senior by many years, looked

nearer his level now; and it was no wonder to me that many should think him hard and cold, or that Rutter, the raw Scotch peasant lad, should go in awe of such a master.

Of that ended episode in his life we never spoke. I knew that from time to time he met Nancy Gillespie—in a little town such encounters are inevitable. I knew, too, that her innate nobleness made their meetings as few and as little wounding to him as might be; but each such reminder of what he had lost could not but give him pain. He was not one to care easily or forget soon. At Christmas Dr. Gillespie had had a slight attack of the prevailing malady, and he had attended him, as in duty bound; but he said nothing of his visits, nor did he question me about my meetings with her at the other Manse. It might have gone easier with him could he have spoken. It would have been a thousand-fold easier to me, suffering for and with him; but it was not his way, and a man must bear his burden as it fits him best.

Walking down Shaw Street, in the comfortable security that there was no malicious old censor seated in the bow-window of Bridge House to criticise one's walk or question one's movements, I saw Miss Sophia Green tripping out of a shop. She was afoot and dragonless on this occasion, and her peaceful expression was accounted for when she explained that Aunt Maria had been summoned home by the illness of one of her daughters-in-law.

"I am afraid you are a very heartless person, Miss Sophia. You are actually smiling."

"She isn't suffering, you know"—she gave a little nod—"just a slow, comfortable, lazy kind of illness—an excuse for beef-tea and chicken-broth and grapes, and pretty tea-gowns and a comfortable sofa. And Aunt Maria does dearly love a patient."

"Ah, you haven't given her enough work to do."

She looked up with a quick, half-frightened glance.

"I'm not ill. Why should she want to meddle?"

"Some people are born that way. I used to think that Miss Matty only lived between the boards of the nursery story-book; but since I grew up and came to Shawbridge, I find she's a type."

"You would have found it out long ago if you had been a girl. You don't know what a privilege it is to be a man."

"I'll begin to realize it, if you'll let me walk a little way with you. The Philistines will be upon us immediately."

"Thank you. The mill hands always scare me, even when I'm driving; but I'll be quite safe. I'm going to pay a visit. You won't guess where, so I may as well tell you. I'm going to a Dorcas party."

"Is that a new kind of tea-meeting?"

"Oh, you know! You make clothing for the poor. I've been buying some stuff. I dare say I'll know some of the people; and it will be very good fun."

"Excellent, I'm sure. Are men admitted?"

"As if men could sew!"

"They can criticise. It's a very useful accomplishment, I assure you, Miss Sophia."

"Ah, but that's Mrs. Laidlaw's function. It's to her house I'm going. She got back two days ago." She looked up as if to deprecate criticism. "I met her at Mrs. Baird's yesterday, and she asked me herself. She was very kind. I think her much nicer than I was told she was."

"Ah, that's what Red Ridinghood thought of dear old grandmamma till she changed into the wolf. Take care she doesn't gobble you up, Miss Sophia. It would be better to be discreet, like Dr. Sutherland and me, and run away."

"Are you going away?" She looked surprised.

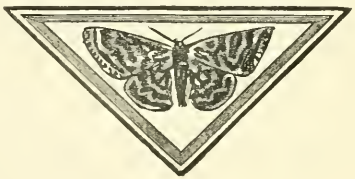
"We are two sadly overworked people, and, unlike the Peebles gentleman, we are not satisfied with Shawbridge for pleasure. We're going to take ours in London."

She coloured, and her dark eyes were eager.

"I love London. I wish I were going there."

"And I wish I were leaving you anywhere but at grandmamma's door."

"Oh, I'll be quite safe!" she said, recovering her little air of shy dignity. "It's only Aunt Maria who thinks I can't be trusted."



CHAPTER XIII.

THE panting engine had crawled toilsomely up the bleak slopes of the Cheviots, and with recovered breath was hastening down the decline to the shelter of the South.

From the uneasy sleep into which we had fallen as we were borne through the mirk night, we were wakened to sudden horror by a rending jar, followed by a quick leaping, vibrating motion of the train, as if it were a thing of life, instinct with fear, and frantic to escape some guessed-at doom.

Tossed and buffeted, as for one long minute our carriage oscillated from side to side before recovering its equilibrium, neither of us could gasp out a word. Sutherland was the first to gather breath and composure.

"Are you unhurt, Harry?" he asked, with a keen edge of fear in his voice.

"Only a bruise or two. And you?"

"All right. That was a near shave. We were off the line. I'm afraid there's been worse behind."

We were in complete darkness, the light above us having been extinguished by the shock; but the train had now come to a standstill, and, thrusting heads from broken windows, we could see far down the permanent way the blurred outline of a wreck with lights moving about it here and there. The wind coming in our direction brought the hiss of escaping steam, and, shudderingly crossing it, the cry of the imprisoned, fighting for life. The engine, by some miracle, had kept the line, and had dragged the foremost carriages back to safety, but down yonder, where the couplings had broken under the strain, what horror of death and destruction should we not find?

Sutherland groped for the travelling-candle, by whose light he had read through the early

hours of the night, and made a quick search for his bag among our huddled and confused possessions. I noticed that my hand, struck by a fragment of falling glass, was bleeding. A firm turn of my handkerchief staunched the flow for the moment; I was not going to be left behind. When we reached the first agitated group of sufferers Sutherland made it known he was a medical man, and in the indescribable scene that followed he found occupation enough. My own recollection of it is one of mazed horror, such as I used to feel as a child in studying the illustrations of Dante's Inferno. Where the train had parted in two, a couple of carriages had dashed themselves against the parapet of a bridge, and, forcing themselves through the obstruction, lay in matchwood now at the bottom of the embankment; others, telescoped into each other, piled the line with ruins. Only those at the far end of the long express had, like ours at the front, escaped with little damage.

Bonfires hastily lit from broken spars and

splinters, flared up towards the black heaven, and lit the weird, horrible picture; in that dancing glare men worked with the fierceness of wild beasts, and the strength of giants. Who would not be inspired by those anguished cries, once heard never to be forgotten? Already a black line of inanimate figures lay upon the grassy slope of the bank, wrapped in a silence that should for ever remain undisturbed; gone were these, from the appeal to man to the tribunal of God. A quick motion of hand and head, as Sutherland, surrounded by many helpers, made his swift examination, pronounced their sentence. Time and enough to mourn the dead; the precious moments were all too few to save the wounded and the perishing.

In the work of extricating the victims, pinned down in many cases with fallen wreckage, I could give little help; at best it fell to me to console the distracted survivors who had escaped with little injury. I was administering a dose from my flask to a woman who had fainted from sheer terror, when an urgent hand

plucked at my sleeve, and a voice, penetrated with fear and trouble, said shrilly—

"Come, oh, come with me. You are not wanted here ; she has only fainted ; it is cruel to waken her. Ford—there is no one to help her ; she lies there so white, and I cannot rouse her. They are all so busy, nobody will listen. Oh, will nobody help me ?"

I looked up from the grass on which I knelt, and by the leaping light saw a slim figure bending down to me. Her disordered hair had escaped from under the hood of the travelling-cloak she had pulled over it ; her eyes were full of the fear with which she had awaked out of her sleep ; her gloveless hands clutched each other nervously. Her voice and accent bespoke refinement.

"Of course I will go with you," I said, screwing the top on to my flask.

The woman I had been trying to help was recovering, and could safely be left in charge of her husband.

"Lift her back," I said to him, "so that she won't see this when she recovers consciousness.

Help will be here immediately from Banbridge, and you'll be able to get her under shelter."

The girl let me wait for no reply. She had me by the sleeve, as if she feared I would escape her, and was stumbling hurriedly over the wreck-strewn rails.

She stopped at the door of a first-class carriage, immediately behind the scene of the accident; it appeared uninjured, and it had not left the line. She sprang in at the open door, still clutching at my sleeve till I followed her.

"Look," she said, bending down over the figure of a middle-aged woman, who lay outstretched on the seat facing the engine in the attitude of sleep, "here she is; she has never moved or spoken, and I cannot rouse her. Ford, Ford, don't you hear me? She has been wounded, you see." She pushed back a fold of the shawl with trembling fingers, and by the dim light I saw a bluish bruise on the temple, from which a small thread of blood had trickled.

Even to eyes so little used as mine to death, it was clear that help was unavailing. Disordered packages, flung from the rack above, strewed the floor of the carriage; among them was a heavy metal despatch or jewel box, square and sharp-cornered, which had doubtless in its descent dealt the fatal blow.

"Why don't you do something!" cried the girl, turning on me imperiously. "Are you going to make excuses and forsake us too? A man came and looked at her and said he would send help, but he never did. Oh, what shall I do?"

To soothe her I knelt and moistened the blue-white lips with a little brandy. I tried to force a few drops down the throat, but they trickled back.

"Who is she?" I asked, to gain time.

"She is Ford—our maid. I have been paying a visit, and mamma sent her to travel home with me. Oh, what will mamma say?"

"Your mother was attached to her?" I asked, getting up from my useless task.

"She's an invaluable servant," she said, with

reserve. Then fear crept into her eyes. They were child-like eyes, clear, and the colour of amber. The hair that escaped under the hood had a copper tinge. "Why do you speak in the past tense?" she asked, her voice falling to a frightened whisper.

"I'm afraid I must," I said helplessly.

She sat down dizzily on the opposite seat, and covered her face with her hands. I was afraid she was going to cry—and what can a man do before a woman's tears?—but she did not.

"Are you sure?" she said presently, but so low I could scarcely catch the words.

"I am not a medical man, so of course I cannot be absolutely sure; but I fear there is little chance of any mistake. Has she never moved or spoken?"

"Never."

"Tell me all you can."

"I made Ford come in with me here. We had the carriage to ourselves. I was sleeping, and I remember nothing till I woke with a terrible crash, and knew that something

dreadful had happened. I called to Ford, but she didn't answer. I was too frightened to move at first, then I went to try and get help." The sentences came out brokenly, she was making a great effort at control.

"I am going to ask you to take this, please," I said, pouring a little brandy and water into the cup of my flask; "yes, drink it, it will do you good." She obeyed, and a little shade of colour came back to her face. "Now, if you will stay here, I will go in search of a friend of mine—a doctor—and see if he can be spared to come back with me."

"You have a friend—a doctor here—and you never said so!" There was wonder and reproach in her look.

"Because he is more needed where he is."

She got up hurriedly.

"Don't leave me," she said, "if—if you are right, I should be afraid," she shuddered. "Let me go with you."

So we groped our way over the obstructions together. A gang of men from Banbridge, the nearest village, and a couple of doctors

had now arrived, and Sutherland could be released. He listened, lifting his cap to the young lady, but scarcely glancing at her, and turned to go back with us at once. He went alone into the railway carriage, but the briefest examination sufficed. In a moment he had stepped on the platform again.

"I am sorry," he said gently, "but I can do nothing. Her lip quivered, and again she said piteously—

"What will mamma say!"

Sutherland looked at her more closely. Perhaps the words struck him oddly as they had me; perhaps he was moved by the childish appeal of the quivering lips and wide eyes.

But from the moment he came she was less excited, more courageous. He has a way of creating confidence. It seemed natural that, learning as he did that she was companionless, he should think for her. Under his care, the body of the dead woman was carried to the bank to be transferred, when the injured had been cared for, to the waiting-room at Banbridge Station where the inquest would be held.

There were not many women among the passengers, and Sutherland's hope that we should find some motherly person to look after the young stranger was not fulfilled. Those to whom he appealed had friends or relatives among the victims who claimed their anxious thoughts, or were preoccupied with their own discomfort. He had bade us wait for him in the now empty compartment; my strange companion sat quietly and said nothing—her eyes fixed on the opposite seat.

He told us when he returned, that the few carriages which had as yet been mustered, were being filled with the injured and their friends.

"Banbridge is, I find, our nearest refuge," he addressed the girl; "it is three miles distant, a little less if we go by the line, but it is rough walking. If you feel able for it, my friend and I will see you safely there. There is a very decent inn, I'm told, in the village, where you could stay till you can communicate with your family."

She rose at once, eager to leave the melancholy scene.

"I am quite strong—I can walk a long way. Please let us go now."

She professed herself willing to venture by the line, which blocked, was indeed safe enough; but it was, as Sutherland had said, rough travelling. The night was still inky dark; a slight fine drizzle was falling. We had left all luggage behind us, with the exception of a small dressing-bag she had pointed out, which Sutherland carried with his own, and a bundle of wraps I made my charge. She had recovered her hat, and with one or two of those quick, deft touches, that are a mystery to the mere male creature, she had smoothed her unruly locks, and tidied her disarray. Something in her light, quick walk hinted at a latent fund of courage, and she bore herself erectly, and with grace.

The lantern we had borrowed threw but a small circle of light upon our path; but if by chance she stumbled, she ignored the hand

one or other of us held out to help. A proud young lady, now that she was recovering control of her nerves.

A strange walk that, in the teeth of the inclement weather and enveloping dark, and stranger still the days which followed. We walked almost in silence, guessing little the future we were travelling to meet; Sutherland was absorbed, dwelling still on the pitiful wounds he had tried to succour. For me, the weird, hideous scene was burned on my brain—a picture painted in fire against the solid blackness of night's canvas—only the girl, chance companion of the hour, she who had come closest within death's circling shadow, was, to outward seeming, the least moved.

She was very young, as was to be seen next morning, when Sutherland knocked at the door of the landlady's parlour in the White Hart, and asked permission to speak to her. The inn was taxed to find room for so many unexpected guests; but Sutherland had secured an efficient protector for our

charge in the smiling, good-humoured owner of the house. We had betaken ourselves to a humbler hostelry higher up the village street.

An hour or two of sound, young sleep had brought back a little of her natural colour; she was slim and erect, the result of much Swedish drill and careful calisthenics, and she carried herself with an odd little air of pride and dignity, which, every now and then, broke down before her girlish fears. It gave way when Sutherland told her she would have to remain for the inquest.

"Must I?" she said helplessly.

"I'm afraid so. But of course your friends will come to you. The first thing to do is to telegraph to them that you are safe and well, before they have time to read of the accident in the papers, and be alarmed on your account."

"There's only mamma. She won't see the papers for hours yet."

"But she will probably expect you. If all had gone well, you would have been in town before this."

"Yes, of course; I forgot—and Ford—poor Ford!"

"If you would allow me to telegraph for you——"

"Oh yes, please! It—it will break it."

"But—the address"—he smiled.

Her laugh broke out, for the moment chasing trouble away.

Her face with its new brightness was charming—an oval face, the colour quick to come and go; a fine little nose, with a wilful tip; hair that it would be crude to call red; eyes of that clear amber, which some one describes as wine-coloured, bordered with dark lashes; eyes that would make any face remarkable.

She showed the prettiest white teeth when she laughed.

"How stupid of me! I have never told you my name! I am Patricia Uniacke. Mamma is Lady Uniacke; we live in London —150, Pont Street. You are Dr. Sutherland, aren't you? The landlady told me. And your friend is Mr. Fowler? It feels as if

we had been quite properly introduced, doesn't it?" She spoke with the ease of a little lady of the world. Then her expression changed again.

"This—this inquiry; when is it to be?"

"This afternoon. You will be able to return to London with your friends to-morrow."

"Are you going away?" she asked, with apprehension.

"No, we are remaining."

"Mamma won't come," she said, with a shaken head, "and there's no one else she can send—unless"—she frowned, breaking off.

Sutherland looked perplexed.

"I'm afraid it's rather dull for you here," he said; "those who were able to travel went on by special train to catch the express at Carlisle this morning; there are only the injured and their friends left."

"And the dead," she said, covering her eyes.

"Your maid did not suffer," he said kindly. 'It was all over in a single instant."

"Yes," she said, making a struggle for

composure. "I suppose that's something, if one must be killed; but death is horrible—horrible!"

Sutherland rejoined me in the road where he had left me. There was not much to look at. The bleak highway dipped down the hill to the long village street, and then climbed up again and lost itself in the moors. A great sense of space and of unutterable dulness was the impression Banbridge left, though summer weather might reveal unguessed charms. The little station attracted the most limited traffic; express trains whizzed by it in a scornful flash; two general shops, a smithy, the doctor's villa at one end, the church, with its surrounding graveyard, at the other, sufficed all the needs of the population, living and dead. The little public where we were housed, and the more pretentious inn, which had opened its doors to the sufferers, were the sole centres of a languid life.

Sutherland wore a look of half amusement half vexation.

"She's such a child! She wants to go for a walk!"

"There isn't much to walk to apparently."

"Well, there's no one else to take her."

We looked back at the inn; its pulses stirred to a sudden fever. The village doctor and an assistant, summoned from some neighbouring parish, were in charge of the patients.

"They're on their own ground; I'm not wanted," he said, in answer to my question. "I've telegraphed to Miss Uniacke's friends; till they come to look after her we must do the best we can—though why we should be singled out as knight-errants to a damsel in distress—— Why, it was you who went to the rescue; by all that's fair you ought to play the chaperon, Fowler. You look the part, in that old coat."

"Then you must come along to protect me," I said, as if I didn't know the kindness of his heart towards all helplessness.

So we took Miss Uniacke for a tramp over the moorland road, where the wind met us in the teeth, sent shivers down my spine, and brought a royal colour into her cheeks. She

proved, like so many modern girls, a capital walker, and she brightened up under the exercise and gave us many little particulars of her history. She had been visiting some friends in Glasgow—her first acquaintance with Scotland—and had seemingly had a very good time in that hospitable bustling capital.

"I think I'm the loneliest girl in all London," she said. "Mamma was an only child, and papa had only one brother, and he is unmarried, so I haven't a single cousin."

"Some people would think that not wholly an unmitigated drawback," said Sutherland, lightly; "in Scotland the counting of kin has degenerated into a vice."

"Ah, but it's nice to feel that you've people that belong to you; there were such lots of relatives coming and going at the house I was staying at; it made me feel as if I were only sitting on the edge of the world, and had never been right in the middle of it."

She meant to tell us nothing, of course, that dignity would have forbidden; but she was half a child, as Sutherland had said, and

somehow the picture which we gathered of her home life was unfavourable. The very tone of her carelessly-uttered "mamma" had its tale to tell; a grown-up daughter bestows the sweeter word "mother" when the relationship justifies it.

When we got back to the inn, reply telegrams were waiting us. Miss Uniacke read hers in silence; but I saw the rising colour of shame and anger throb in her throat and dye her cheek.

"I knew mamma wouldn't come," she said, trying to speak naturally, as she handed the paper to Sutherland. "She isn't very strong, and she hates to be frightened."

The words he read were these—

"Dreadfully upset. Cannot possibly come. Find some respectable people to travel with."

Sutherland crushed the paper in his strong hand.

"It's all right," he said quietly, "if you'll accept our escort. Unless there's anybody else you would like to send for?"

"There is nobody else. Uncle Robert is too

old; he couldn't come. But—if you don't mind letting me go in the same carriage as you—I have never travelled alone."

So, by the decree of destiny, she became our charge; an embarrassing one, but for Sutherland's coolness. To him she looked, and not without justification—in the trying ordeal of that afternoon. She never knew how carefully he shielded her, saving her all that was possible, but her dependence on him was perfectly naïve and frank. Me she treated with a certain peremptoriness, as if she expected my obedience; to him she was all submission. Some relatives of the dead maid turned up at the inquest; respectable people, who were resentfully mournful; already whispering to each other the word "compensation." Miss Uniacke went and spoke to them, with a white and quivering face.

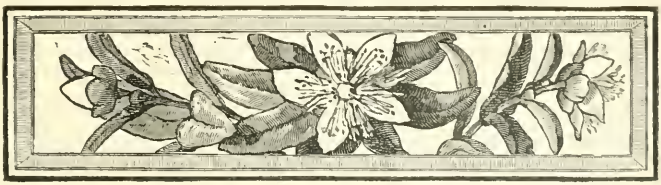
"You see," she whispered, coming back coweringly to my side, "poor Ford never cared for me, and that makes it worse. She was mamma's maid."

So the verdict was brought in, and the living

and the dead went each to his own place. No one has blundered; shift the blame to the heavily-weighted shoulders of Fate! The line, soaked by a deluging rainfall, had subsided under the burden of the express, tearing at full speed down a decline, and a dozen poor souls had paid the forfeit.

Our journey, begun that same evening, for we were in time for the late train, was without event. Sutherland and I exchanged our third for first-class tickets, rescued Miss Uniacke's luggage, and took the best care we could of our chance acquaintance.

She revived with the elasticity of her years when the scene of trouble was left well behind, and was a charming companion, but as our train puffed into St. Pancras her face clouded. It was a transparent face, and the storm signals were easily read upon it.



CHAPTER XIV.

I WAS about to put out my head to hail a porter as the train slowed and came to a standstill, when a large, good-tempered red face, attached to a large, overgrown body, was thrust in at the window.

"Well, Pat, my dear, here you are, safe and sound, thank God," said a husky voice. "Congratulate you."

The young person in the corner seat drew herself up stiffly.

"I have told you before, Lord Mortlake, that I object to be called Pat," she said freezingly.

"Yes, to be sure; awfully sorry, but so glad to see you safe, you know," he stammered.

By this time, in spite of an exceedingly tight yellow glove, he had wrestled successfully with the door handle. The glove had got a little soiled in the process, and he looked at it doubtfully, as if he thought Miss Uniacke might object to shake the hand within it.

Her behaviour coloured the supposition, for she tucked her own hands into her jacket pockets, with a boyish air put on for him; the frown, in which her level brows met, was also worn for the unfortunate gentleman.

"Why did you come?" she demanded.

"To see you home," he said, as if glad to find the answer so simple. "Your mother thought you would be alone."

"But I am not alone, you see. These gentlemen have been very kind to me; but for them I don't know what would have become of me."

Lord Mortlake lifted his hat, and murmured something about Miss Uniacke's family being under great obligations to us; but he looked at us askance. Evidently he thought the

young lady might have found more suitable protectors, and neither of us resented the honest gentleman's scruples, though Sutherland's tone was rather curt, as he said—

"The young lady was left unprotected at a very trying crisis. My friend and I can only count it a privilege if we were able to be of any service."

We rose to gather our traps, and bow our farewells; but Miss Uniacke struck in, in her clear, decided tones—

"Yes, Lord Mortlake, that's just what I think of you, too. If you had come to Banbridge it might have been of some use; but I suppose the proprieties are saved if I'm escorted safely through the London streets! I see mamma has sent the parlourmaid. Would you please show her the way to the luggage van? Scrope is such a goose, she will never manage by herself. My boxes have a big red 'U' upon them, so you can't mistake them."

Confused and embarrassed, he turned away to obey her, and while he was peering helplessly into the compartment from which the

big, shining milk-cans we had picked up on the way were being shot forth, and getting embroiled with porters, and mixed up with flurried travellers, our little lady made her farewells.

She turned on us a face of laughing mischief.

"He's going to be my step-papa some day, so he may as well be useful. I'm teaching him in time, poor dear, because I dare say he thinks he's going to have authority over me, and it would be a pity to deceive him."

"But he'll be a relation," said Sutherland, with a smile.

"Oh, but I didn't mean second-hand relations, especially when one isn't given one's choice. There is Scrope peering about for me. I'm afraid poor Lord Mortlake hasn't recognized my belongings, though there can't surely be any other red U's travelling about."

We saw her, and all her small impedimenta, safely into the hands of maid and porter. She said good-bye very prettily, offering us each her small, slim fingers, and with a touch of

sadness, recalling the scene we had witnessed together.

Sutherland laughed softly when she was out of sight.

"His lordship was scarcely prepared to endorse her selection of "respectable" travelling-companions!"

"She hadn't any choice, poor child."

"*We* hadn't, anyway. Well, that small adventure is over. Let's be getting on, or there won't be a cabby left in the ranks."

But we were not quite at the end of the little story yet. While a porter was hoisting our portmanteaux on to a hansom, his lordship again bore down upon us with an air of embarrassed but determined affability. It was as plain as the stars in the sky that he was having a second lesson in doing as he was told, but he acquitted himself very creditably, saying everything that was polite and appropriate, and on his assurance that Lady Uniacke would herself wish to thank us for our care of her daughter, we exchanged cards.

"You would scarcely believe," said Suther-

land, as we were lightly bowled along the streets, "that that chap, who looks, and is, such a duffer in civil life, played his part very creditably as a soldier. I remember Tom Carnegie speaking of him; and, with all his faults, Tom knows a good officer when he sees him."

"That's perhaps the secret of his prompt obedience."

"It's often the way. A man who is brave enough when he's about his own business, is dominated by the first petticoat that chooses to exert authority. If he becomes Miss Uniacke's step-father, I venture to prophesy he'll find he's got two tyrants to reckon with."

"A little campaigning wouldn't do his figure any harm. He's unprofessionally stout."

"He'll have to work it out in reduction of domestic rebellion, then. Our young friend will keep his hands full. He retired from the service years ago. He has considerable means, I believe."

"He looks a bit of a fool."

He laughed.

"It's that little witch. I dare say she made us look a pair of noodles too. She isn't old enough to appreciate Mortlake for his money, as her mother does, and she's young enough to fancy him old, and to snub him accordingly."

"How can you tell that her mother appreciates Lord Mortlake's money?"

"Because she has very little of her own."

"I don't see how you gathered that."

"Easily enough. While you were inscribing our address on your card, I had a glimpse of the brougham which hid our travelling-companion. Nobody who wasn't pretty hard up would permit such a sorry screw between the shafts—and the man's livery was a misfit, his predecessor was both bigger and stouter. I say, I suppose you do know where we're going? We seem to be pretty long in getting there."

Our destination was a quiet street near Kensington Gardens. Sutherland, who professed to be holiday-making to please me, cared little where he was housed, and to me London's big playground had an enduring

charm. Nowhere, within so small an acreage can you have your choice between an almost rural solitude, peopled by sooty sheep, and the rush and breezy hurry of an ever-moving crowd. Fashion has lifted her disdainful skirts, flying the old Court suburb in its age and despoiled beauty, but ghosts of a gayer past still haunt its changed scenes. In the darkening they steal out, and one in a thousand, perhaps, of an unheeding generation sees and greets them.

When I told him where we were going, Sutherland said he was glad that we were out of Fashion's beat.

"Not that Society has any notice to spare for you and me, but it irritates me to see people making such an utter mess of their lives as these fashion-mongers do. They are as hard-worked as convicts in the treadmill, and as uselessly."

"Oh, well, we're in the outer darkness, in Brown Street, our arrival won't be trumpeted. Besides, it's only March: too soon for the season's fever."

"An incurable fever, so long as men and women fancy that the world centres itself in Mayfair, and that you can't know anything of 'life' unless you've a bowing acquaintance with a few hundred swells. The world is pretty much the same everywhere, and twenty-five people in a provincial town will give you as wide a range as ever you want of human nature."

"One Mrs. Laidlaw will do that!"

"Don't be snappy, Fowler. Aren't you in London where your soul longed to be? We'll sink Shawbridge and all its inhabitants while we are here. It's holiday-time, and there isn't the smallest good in changing your local habitation if you're going to carry the same old train of thoughts and ideas about with you in your luggage. You should learn to unbend gracefully, man. As for me, I mean to do nothing but sleep and eat and stare about me. I hope you remembered to order breakfast? I'm as hungry as a wolf."

His cheerfulness seemed pretty spontaneous; with his strong will he was putting his foot

down on the past, though it was scarcely possible to suppose he could blot it out of his life by a mere effort of determination. But more than any other doctor I have ever known, he was able to apply his own prescriptions personally, and with him "Don't fret" was no mere fragment of his stock-in-trade tendered to a patient. He had warred with that evil demon, worry, and knew that conquest was possible. He was no marplot with a melancholy face, to spoil one's pleasure.

But Shawbridge refused to let us wipe out from mind and memory it and its concerns so easily. On our breakfast-table lay one or two notes and telegrams of kind concern and congratulation. From Mrs. Laidlaw herself came, by the trembling hand of Miss McAlister, a peremptory command for information: our safety she seemed to regard in the light of a godsend, chiefly because it left us capable of thrilling her with a new sensation, and providing her with a topic to spice her receptions. It is delightful to feel one's self of some use in the world. What I prized more

were the sloping uncertain lines in which the blind minister rejoiced in our escape. A few words in a feminine hand to the same effect, were added as a postscript. They were unsigned, but when I handed the note in silence to Sutherland, his eyes rested on that little message longest of all.

At last he looked up. His mouth was ironical.

"He says he hopes you'll be able to see something of his son. That's a nice pleasure in store for you!"

"Well, if it's a pleasure to him——"

"What! To Mr. Frank Cunningham? You must be more modest, my dear Fowler; you are a mere lounger in the by-paths of literature, you do not mould public opinion in the slashing review or the social paragraph. You have never, so far as I know, even been interviewed. If I mistake not, Mr. Frank Cunningham will regard you in much the same light as I should a vendor of quack medicines from the cart's tail—an unauthorized meddler in things too high for you—unless,

indeed, you present yourself before him as an unknown admirer."

"Rot!"

"Your tone is too frivolous, Harry. We're discussing the susceptibilities of a literary man."

"You may be. I was thinking we might have the good luck to please two guileless and blameless people, whose worst crime it is to have given too generously."

"So you're going to act the mediator?" he asked, sudden passion darkening his face. "You're going to rehabilitate him in your letters, so that she——"

"No," I struck in. "God knows, if he needs rehabilitation he must work out his own salvation. No man can do another's repenting for him. But it's not like you to judge a man unheard. He may have had good enough reasons for his silence."

He sat for a while looking darkly down at his plate, saying no word. Then his face cleared.

"You'll have to look him up, of course.

I knew it from the first, but—I won't offer to go with you—I hate the fellow too cordially. I think I'll go out for a pipe, and look round. You might as well give me that list of books old Cunningham wants. I'm going down to the Strand to order some for myself, and perhaps I can pick up these too. Breakfast at this unholy hour has knocked out lunch for to-day. You might meet me somewhere for dinner."

We agreed on a trysting-place, and he left me.

I had not told him that my chief object in coming to town was to seek out Frank Cunningham, though, no doubt, he guessed it. Two people who live in such close intimacy as had been ours since childhood, get to be accurate readers of each other's minds. What was to be gained by making young Cunningham's acquaintance remained undefined in my thoughts—probably very little. I was not fool enough to imagine that I should exercise any influence over him; that subtle form of conceit is usually wholesomely

chased out of one's system as one advances in life; but it might be that the sight of some one coming direct from the man who took his father's place, and the woman who loved him, would shame him into relieving their anxiety.

We were comfortably lodged with a landlady who understood the needs of bachelor man, and there was nothing to do but to toss out the contents of portmanteaux into wardrobe and drawers, stow away travelling-gear, and get into clean linen after the necessary tub had washed away the stains of travel.

Sutherland was ready first, and he left the house with a bang of the door that told me he had gone. But I knew that he would come back restored to his usual equanimity, and that he had taken himself off so that I might prosecute my search without embarrassment.

By great good luck I found Davidson, that shining rushlight of modern literature, at home. He was, in fact, in bed, and I owed it perhaps to that circumstance that he was

willing to admit me at uncanonical hours when I sent up my name. His face had a yellow pallor, increased by the wet handkerchief bound about his brow; and his dark, smouldering eyes looked more sunken than usual. He was unshaved, and the wadded dressing-gown he wore had evidently been chosen when his complexion was not at the mercy of a bilious attack. Even his detractors—and what man has not a few?—were unanimous in agreeing that the only occasion upon which Davidson did not pose was when he was ill. I feel sure they were right, for he would certainly have chosen a more picturesque complaint had choice been his.

He said he was very glad to see me, and he paid me the compliment of tucking a yellow novel well out of sight under the pillow. His rooms had undergone a great transformation since I last saw them. They were Japanesy then—as if a bit of Tokio had descended on sooty London. They represented some other period now—early British—

at a hazard. A little bare and severe, perhaps; but there was comfort in being able to move without knocking over a table on tottering bamboo legs, a precious vase, or a spindly cabinet, or of finding yourself in danger of suspension by the hair of your head in ducking under the ribs of an outspread umbrella.

I asked him if he had been contributing to a jumble sale. He glanced at me for a minute; then he said, condescendingly—

"Oh, you're referring to my decorations? Yes, I remember; we took our cue from the East, when you were here last. We've outgrown all that, you know; but I suppose we move faster than you do. I dare say you're still at the cult of the fan and the art-pot down your way; but in London there's nothing so intolerable as the fashion of last year."

It struck an impartial observer that when the fickle goddess of change decreed some newer law to her votaries, there would be conveniently little to discard in this swept and garnished flat; but I only observed that

Sutherland and I were provincials now, and had come up to get the rust rubbed off.

"I thought I'd look you up at once, and get the newest news from you."

If you want to make yourself agreeable, set a man to talk about himself. There is nothing weak human nature loves more, and the indulgence costs nothing but a little patience on the listener's part. And Davidson's talk always interests me. The man who, more than crowned and sceptred king, than poet, warrior, lawgiver, should move and sway his fellows, would be he who should write an absolutely veracious account of his inmost thoughts, feelings, passions, desires. The thing never has been done, and never will be done, unless, as some think, the great Reckoning Day will make each man his own biographer; because when we take the pen or open our lips, we are half conscious hypocrites, and utter that which we ought to feel rather than that which we do feel. But sometimes we get glimpses of such a self-revelation; we stand, as it were, upon the

edge of such a confession, and it is borne in upon us what to be in the centre and heart of it might mean.

Davidson cared not a straw about me or my affairs, and frankly made little pretence that way; but I was a passive bucket into which he poured the ocean of his egotism. He found me convenient, a handy receptacle for the overflowing of his mind, and he liked me a little on that account. Heavens, how he talked! one red spot burning on either yellow cheek, his eyes a dull fire, his big shaggy head shot forward between his shoulders. A head well enough furnished with brains, for your egoist need not be a fool. Davidson has the sort of cleverness that goes to make success, and is almost as indispensable to the papers he represents as he thinks himself to be.

His landlady had come in once to replenish the dying fire while his voice flowed on, and the evening had darkened down and she had come again to ask if he would have tea before I could edge in the question I had come to ask.

"Cunningham?" he said, the interest dying

out of his eyes, and a look of indifference settling there. "I've lost sight of him; had to give him up, you know. He's gone too far under."

"How does he live, then?"

He shrugged those big shoulders clumsily.

"He works by fits and starts when he can pull himself together."

"Drink?"

"Worse. He's a morpho-maniac. It's a pity," he said, with conventional compassion, "for that sort of thing brings literature into disrepute. It's only a De Quincy who can risk that little game and—make it pay. And Cunningham had a pretty little talent; no staying power, you know, but a neat touch. By the way, have you seen that article of mine in the *Torch?* It's deuced good, though I say it. Touches up Severn on the raw spot"—he harked back to the old theme.

"I'll read it," I said, in the first available pause. I was ready to pledge myself to anything if he would but answer me. "Can you get Cunningham's address for me?"

He looked annoyed, fretted, as a horse might feel when the tether pulls him up short.

"I dare say I could, if it was worth while."

"It is worth while. Do, there's a good fellow. Here's our address. We're just round the corner. You might drop me a line—or look us up."

"Do you mean to say you're interested in him?" he asked, as if personally aggrieved by the suggestion. "You who can claim *my* friendship," his look said, "stoop to hunt out a broken-down devil like him?"

"I am interested in him, for the sake of his people."

"Oh, well, well," he said impatiently, "I'll see what I can do. But better let him alone, you won't do any good, you know. Must you be going? Well, pop in soon again, and tell me what you think of my reply to Severn. I'll send you the number; it had to be reprinted—first issue all gone on the day of publication. I scored *that* time," he chuckled. "Good-bye. Awfully glad to have seen you, old man. Our chat has done me good."

He called it a chat. Perhaps he thought it was.

In that little world within a world he had unfolded to me—its inhabitants think it the universe—there are lights of many magnitudes —constellations, planets, fixed stars. Alas that there should be meteors too, at best a brief, bright flash, ending in nothingness!

CHAPTER XV.

SUTHERLAND held a small note in his hand, and looked at it this way and that with ironical amusement. It was written on exceedingly thick paper, of an odd shade of blue, with a minute monogram in one corner, and "Clara" inscribed in straggling gold letters across the other, and it gave Dr. Sutherland permission to call on Lady Uniacke, to receive her gracious thanks. It named the day and the hour when her ladyship would find it convenient to bestow these. The day had already broken—the hour was five o'clock. It was what ladies call a "pretty note." Sutherland found it too gracious.

"What does it mean?" he asked, fingering it as if it would explode.

"Apparently just what it says. She wants to express her gratitude to you."

"She doesn't propose to thank you."

"Mercifully, no! Isn't one of us enough?"

"She has taken four days to examine the situation," he said grimly. "I dare say she has been making inquiries. Wanted to know whether she shouldn't receive me in the housekeeper's room, and offer me a glass of wine and half a crown. Apparently my character has stood the test. I dare say Mortlake has been set to fish out my history and family connection. I told you Tom Carnegie knew him."

"Well, and why not?" I asked. In some ways I find myself a more worldly person than Sutherland, who has a savage hatred of society's little manœuvres. She has a young, impulsive daughter to look after——"

"Much she looked after her at Banbridge!"

"Who seems to have a leaning towards the unconventional," I went on, unheeding the interruption. "From a mother's point of view, you'll own, her choice of travelling-companions was a little bit risky."

But he lost patience at that, and abused me roundly. He said that the atmosphere of London was already tainting my judgment; he denounced, as low and vulgar, the view that a woman, because she is young and pretty, may not turn safely for help in extremity to a man who is not a greybeard. He said it was to degrade womanhood, to destroy the dying spark of that chivalry that made every man, in purer days, a knight, when distress or helplessness claimed him.

Sutherland in a rage is a very stimulating companion, but he is a Quixote, born in the wrong century; for, so long as there are ambitious mammas with pretty daughters to launch on the world, prudence and expedience must rule the day. For my part, I thought no worse of Lady Uniacke because she had been making a little investigation before she invited her daughter's champion to her house, or chose to countenance an acquaintance begun in so unauthorized a manner. Hadn't Mrs. Whittlemore, whom nobody could accuse of being fashionable, done the same?

But I owed something to our little passage of arms, since, save for it, that delicately-scented note would certainly have gone into the fire, ignored and unanswered. Rub a Scotchman the wrong way and all his native pugnacity bristles forth; he would know Miss Uniacke if he chose, he would befriend her if he chose, let him break every law of Mayfair in the doing of it.

People say he looks his age, but in some ways he will never grow up. No wonder I should feel old and world-worn beside him.

Yet, had I guessed how far his theories would carry him, perhaps I should have rejoiced to see that little letter perish in the flames. At the moment, however, it suited me to be rid of him. Davidson had bidden me to an intellectual feast in his rooms; a gathering of men and women who were "doing 'odd' things;" and I made bold to adventure myself in this fearsome company in the hope of hearing something of Frank Cunningham. For it had not been worth

Davidson's while to seek out the poor black sheep.

Nowhere, perhaps, could I have found myself less at home than in that hive of industrious bees, each intent on buzzing his own affairs into the world's ear. Davidson received me with an absent, two-fingered shake; he informed me in a thick whisper that it was an immense bore that he had let himself in for this, since he had just been inspired with a brilliant idea, and positively *must* work it out. His big head looked as if it would explode unless it were relieved of this dangerous matter; I saw him presently making rapid notes upon his shirt cuff, and nobody seemed to think it at all odd when he retired to the staircase with a thick manuscript book and pencil. The spareness of the furnishing necessitated the use of the bedroom for the guests.

From my humble corner seat, on what I took to be a laundry basket, but presently discovered to be Davidson's coal-bin, I was able to make observations on this unexplored

country into which I had drifted—for the Bohemia of which I had once had glimpses, as a passing tourist, is clean vanished away. It is no longer considered a mark of superiority for an inhabitant of that country to wear soiled linen, or long hair; and velvet coats and Byronic collars have gone the way of limp draperies and draggled skirts of æsthetic hue. Once on a day one took pleasure in one's motley; now it is a duty to look as much like other people as possible, and only to feel vastly superior. Frock coats and irreproachable trousers: trim tailor-made waists; the seductive blouse; the picture hat—to this level has Bohemia fallen in abrogating her sumptuary laws.

It was a very lively, brisk, self-satisfied company that had climbed to Davidson's high eerie; it differed only from a fashionable assembly in that each person present had a mission or vocation, which he was anxious to proclaim.

There drifted presently to my corner a very young lady, to whom I made offer of my seat

on the coal-box. She looked down at her fresh summer draperies, and declined with a shaken head. We fell into talk, for in this superior company introductions are considered superfluous.

"Mr. Davidson is so quaint, isn't he?" she said brightly. "You never know, from time to time, where you'll find him."

"At this moment, I believe he's sitting on the stairs."

"Yes," she assented, as if she found nothing odd in her host's behaviour, and nothing ironical in my comment; "you see he had an idea, and it's too precious to waste."

"Rather ill-bred of ideas, isn't it, to choose such ill-timed moments for their visits?"

She looked a little puzzled; then she smiled.

"Oh," she said, "you think it rude? We don't mind; we're all workers, and we know the value of an inspiration; it's too scarce a visitor to treat with neglect."

"I should like very much to be honoured by

an inspiration. Do you think there are any more going about?"

"Oh, we all gather something, I suppose. If you went into the next room you'd see Philip March taking notes at this very minute. He's making copy out of us."

"Out of us?" I stammered.

"Out of everybody here. He's on the staff of *Light and Leading*. He'll call it 'A Scribbler's Symposium,' or something of that sort. He'll make quite a charming article of it. Would you like to speak to him? He's sitting on the bed; you can't fail to recognize him."

"No, thank you, I wouldn't interrupt him for the world," I said promptly. "I've read somewhere of a literary man who used to stick a red wafer on his forehead when he was in the throes of composition to warn off intruders. I'm sure Mr. March has sealed his brow, and if I interrupted him he might revenge himself by putting me into his article."

She said quite seriously that it was a very good idea. Ladies are not supposed to have much sense of humour.

"It's such a bore to be disturbed," she said; "You never can pick up the thread of your thought again."

She was very frankly communicative. I found that she supplied a weekly column of advice to ladies upon a bewildering variety of topics. She called it 'Tea-cup Talk.' She laughed when I ventured to say that her knowledge must indeed be encyclopedic.

"One has to pretend sometimes. I suppose the old oracles were rather humbugs, weren't they? And of course I can get help. My brother is at Barts, and I hand the medical questions over to him; it's good practice for him. There's very little else one can't tackle, with the exercise of a little common sense, and a few books of reference. The girls and women who write to me are mostly idle people, you see, who like the little excitement of a printed correspondence. Nine times out of ten they could answer their own questions if they took the trouble. When a man writes it's different."

"He must be desperate indeed before he

screws his courage to that point. May one venture to ask, without indiscretion, what he writes about?"

"Oh, it's generally about his wife's allowance, or the way she manages the house."

"By way of complaint?"

"Oh yes; he always thinks she's extravagant. I don't think I ever came across a man yet who thought his wife spent too little."

"And you take his part, of course?"

"Oh dear no!" she said crushingly. "It's almost always the man's fault when the domestic machinery doesn't run smoothly. You see you can't drive the notion out of men's heads that woman is a chattel. But perhaps you're married?"

She seemed to have a better opinion of me when she found I had given no woman cause to denounce me in the columns of "Tea-cup Talk" as a tyrant, and she obligingly pointed out all the "interesting" people in the room—they seemed to be interesting in proportion to the eccentricity of their occupations. There was

the lady—a vivacious brunette—who ran a laundry, and her still more daring sister, who had adventured all things in the cause of Journalism. She had taken service as a scullerymaid to write up the wrongs of the basement; had pryed into the shop-girl's grievances; had shared the gutter with the sellers of penny toys, and was now, it was whispered to me with bated breath, considering the propriety of breaking a window or stealing a loaf of bread that she might taste the bitter degradation, the undeserved martyrdom, of imprisonment.

The men, poor, inferior creatures, were naturally less enterprising, were prosy or poetastery, according to their bent and opportunity, or anonymously instructive in the pages of the newspaper. Most of them probably had an acquaintance with the semi-seamy side of life, and perhaps when they were not taking part in a "scribbler's symposium" were rather uncomfortable folk to live with. But then, what would you? An author's emotions are precious copy; he

capitalizes his feelings, and has none left over for fireside use. Doubtless it would be rather trying—if one were a woman—to belong to a literary man. If the public scores, it is the wife who pays.

When I had my chance I asked my question, and then it was a pleasure to find that this young lady, who had so poor an opinion of our sex, had yet a woman's divine gentleness for its frailty.

Her blue eyes expanded.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Cunningham's?" she asked.

"No; but I desire to be."

"I'm so glad," she said simply. "He's in the same lodgings as Tom—that's my brother. Our name is Flower. There's nobody to look after him—it's dreadful. Tom does what he can, but"—she blushed—"it's very little; we are poor."

"You know him, then?"

"Scarcely at all. I've seen him here sometimes, and I always read his things when I can get hold of them. He's very, very clever; he

might do anything. Tom says it's his own fault that he has drifted away from everybody lately; but perhaps he's wrong. The poor fellow can't help being ill, can he?"

Her face was full of pity; she was a brave little woman, making an honest struggle for independence. Her small affectations were not worth weighing in the balance against her compassion for a man of whom she knew little except as a fellow-worker who had fallen by the way.

A man with a merry countenance—a writer, she whispered to me, of a melancholy and pathetic turn—came up at this moment to speak to her, but not before she had given me her brother's address, with permission to call on him, and through him to approach young Cunningham.

A cheerful chatter and clink of cups followed me down the long flight of stairs; happy people to be so unassailably convinced of their own importance!

Davidson was still in the grip of the birth-pangs; scattered sheets lay like autumn leaves

around him ; he allowed me, so entire was his absorption, to walk over him without so much as a scowl flung at me.

And this was the world I had once envied !

Perhaps I should have found myself as little at home had I been bidden with Sutherland to Pont Street. Yet he was received with charming unceremoniousness by a very pretty and prettily-dressed woman who had the knack of looking younger than her own daughter. Cynic as he calls himself, Sutherland is just the man to yield to such an influence when he comes within its sphere. He might laugh afterwards and say that Lady Uniacke was a butterfly, a Society woman, a creature with no intellectual needs, but her affectation of being unaffected, her pretty poses, her white hands that made play with the tea-cups, her perfectly adorned body, her gaily frivolous mind, with scarce a rag of costume to its back ; these had their fascination for him as for other men. She was like a cleverly-executed picture, a well-acted scene—a thing to enchant for the moment without any serious result on one's

life. Depend on it, Sutherland would have taken it ill had he been summoned to a glass of wine and a little patronage in the housekeeper's room.

It is easily conceivable that he liked being thanked by such lips and eyes. He began to think Mortlake rather a lucky man on the whole—if one must marry. The daughter, when she came in, seemed to him oddly brusque beside this elegant mother; his impression that the girl was a little hardly used began to fade. She was a tall creature, towering over her little mamma, and her brows looked rebellious. Her dress was unbecoming and almost shabby. She shook hands with Dr. Sutherland stiffly.

"How is Mr. Fowler?" she asked presently.

"He's very well," said Sutherland, "and enjoying himself in his own peculiar way."

"Ah, a friend of yours who is visiting you, I understand?" said Lady Uniacke, graciously. "Patricia, my child, how very remiss we have been! We ought to have asked Mr. Fowler to come and see us, and give us an opportunity

of thanking him for helping to look after you at that terrible time."

"I don't think he would have cared to come," said the girl, very coldly. "He can command far more interesting company than ours."

"He is literary, is he not?" Lady Uniacke turned to Sutherland quite amiably. "Authors are delightful people; so odd, but then, of course, they can afford to be so. But they make ordinary people feel just a little nervous —a little more stupid than usual!"

"Mr. Fowler doesn't write. He is only an absorber of other people's works."

This was perhaps rather a damaging admission. The fashionable lady had got on beautifully with the young Scotch doctor. She knew all about the Carnegie connection —it contains many much more respectable members than poor Colonel Tom—and she knew Lord Harrow quite intimately; but this poor Fowler had no fine relatives to trot out, and he hadn't even the passing distinction of being a Scotch author. Novels in dialect

were coming into vogue at the time, and even fashionable folk had to pretend some zest for them.

"A student?" Lady Uniacke lifted a pair of whimsical brows. "That is even more alarming to a poor ignoramus like you or me, isn't it, Patricia?"

She pictured the absentee, no doubt, as the wearer of rusty clothes, with a great deal of hair, and a very small washing-bill, and Miss Patricia was perhaps scolded in private for bringing this person so prominently into the conversation.

With girlish perverseness she stuck to the subject, however, and asked so many questions about that coterie of literary aspirants with whom the absent Fowler was privileged to mingle, and of whose doings and sayings Sutherland discoursed so lightly and laughingly, that a little pucker of annoyance appeared upon the mother's fair brow. This, you see, was by no means one of the topics upon which she shone.

"You must forgive the poor child," she said

with determined serenity to the visitor. "She has shot up into such a great big thing, able to look down upon her own mamma, that I quite forget she has just left the schoolroom, and that novels are quite a new delight to her."

"I think it is the passing of time you forget, mamma," said the young lady, very composedly. "I was eighteen my last birthday, and Miss Smith, my governess, left me two years ago. As for novels, I've read them ever since I could read anything. Miss Smith got them from the circulating library, and we cried over them together. I've read Mr. Davidson's 'The Green Leaf and the Sere,' and that's why I like to hear about him. He's quite disillusioned with life, isn't he? I'm sure he must have an interesting history, because his women are so horrid."

"Dear child, how your naughty tongue runs away with you!"

Lady Uniacke's tone was sub-acid, and there was a spark in her blue eyes that threatened a conflagration. Clearly mother and daughter

were antipathetic, and if the elder knew how to keep the peace in public, the younger had less skill, less tact, more honesty, just as you like to put it. There is something very terrible to grown-up feelings in the rash combativeness of youth, its readiness to rush into the fray; if there are troublesome mammas in the world as we are so frequently told there are nowadays, there are certainly troublesome daughters too.

Fortunately, for Sutherland's comfort, some new guests were announced, and in extending them a graceful welcome, Lady Uniacke's brow cleared.

Sutherland took his leave at once, but not without a cordial invitation to return. He was to lunch at Pont Street. He found himself saddled with several little commissions for his hostess, and charged with messages to relatives who would scarcely have known him if he had presented himself before them, and would more than likely shut their doors in his face.

In passing through a little ante-room, the

third of a small suite, he found Miss Uniacke waiting for him.

"I want to speak to you," she said abruptly. "Oh no, I shan't be missed in there." She gave a backward look at the inmost room, whence came the chatter of soft well-bred voices. "I never go near mamma's visitors. I don't even pour out tea. I haven't got pretty hands or pretty manners, you see, and I'm supposed to be in the schoolroom."

He had thought her almost plain—even a little sulky, but when she looked up roguishly her charm came back.

"I hope you have quite recovered from the effects of the journey?" he said, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh yes, quite. It's about Ford—poor Ford—I wanted to talk to you. Mamma hasn't forgiven me for killing her. Scrope can't dress hair."

"You!" he said, startled. "You had nothing to do with it."

"Women aren't logical," she said, smiling more faintly; "your friend Mr. Davidson will

tell you that. It's one of the least things he has against us. And poor Ford's loss is very inconvenient. It would have been better—really better—if I had been the one who was killed. Ford was really an invaluable maid. But—as she wasn't *my* maid, I can't help thinking of her just as a woman who had hopes and plans, and wanted to live as much as the rest of us—and who had to die in that cruel, horrible way! You saw her people that"— she gave a little shudder— "that day. They didn't seem to like it when I tried to talk to them. Perhaps they, too, thought I was to blame. I suppose I was, because, of course, I could have come home from Glasgow quite well alone."

"Put the notion of your responsibility quite out of your head," said Sutherland, bluntly. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Only to get some money conveyed to the mother. She's old, and Ford had to help her. Ford was with us for ten years."

"I can do that quite easily if Lady Uniacke approves."

"I am independent of my mother," she said, with a haughty uplifting of her little head. "I have two hundred pounds a year of my own. I asked you because Ford's people seemed to take to you, as they certainly didn't to me, and perhaps they would be more willing to listen to you."

Sutherland thought she need have no dread of a refusal; but he only said gravely—

"I am at your service. I will do whatever you wish."

He went home puzzled, a little amused, perhaps a little annoyed; it seemed as if, against his will, he were to be drawn into this new arena of petty squabbles and small spites.

And yet between the mother—a finished social article—and the daughter, with her rash yet generous impulses and crude defiances, the contrast was piquant—if one cared for that sort of thing. He remembered how the girl's eyes had brimmed with tears as she spoke of the unfortunate maid, and his sympathies wavered back to her. Yet what a nuisance to take sides at all! It was holiday-

time, he wanted no such task. He would fulfil his promises and have done with Pont Street.

A pity that it should fall to me to plunge him back into trouble that was gravely real.

I was waiting for him on Mrs. Brown's doorstep, having but five minutes previously reached it.

"I want you to go with me to see Cunningham—don't delay. It's a case of an overdose of morphia, I fear. We can't rouse him."

His face changed at once—it wore its collected, keen, professional expression. He hurried into the house to fetch such things as he required, and joined me again in a moment.

"Come on," he said, thrusting his arm through mine. "Is it far? Just round the corner? Well, time's precious. We'd better have a hansom."

CHAPTER XVI.

"WE'LL do now," Sutherland said at last. There were three of us in that wretched garret besides the patient; the medical student, whom I had only succeeded in finding at home after calling at his lodgings twice, Sutherland, and myself.

The landlady, at first inclined to be abusive, had been appeased by the settlement of her bill, and would have done what she could if Sutherland had not locked her out of the room. The window, propped open by a clothes-brush, let in the raw air with an easterly nip in it; but Sutherland and the young medical student looked hot and flushed with their exertions. It was a miserable room enough, as bare and comfortless as a hired

lodging can be when the inmate is not punctual in discharging his bills and meets, and perhaps deserves but scant attention. The furniture was of that grained and painted order, depressing at the best, and hideous in decrepitude; a strip of old stair carpet was the only floor covering; a crazy little looking-glass tottering on three feet had been deposed from its table to make room for some scattered papers and writing materials; the water-jug leaked with a melancholy drip; the forlornness of the room was increased by the wet towels with which the patient had been vigorously slapped back to life, flung hither and thither, and by the dust of untold time that lay everywhere.

And upon the frowsy, disorderly bed rested the man who had fallen to this. His head was sunk drowsily on the pillow, his eyelids were puffed and swollen, his face pallid; it was difficult to recognize in this human wreck the bright debonair presentiment that shone out of the picture in the Manse sitting-room; as difficult as it was to think of him slipping

away wilfully from the love and pride and joy that had crowned him there.

Yet the case was simple enough, common enough, quite uncomplicated, from a doctor's point of view. Here was a youth with better brains than most—that was still a fine forehead from which the wet hair was thrust—with a serviceable talent that ensured him against want, yet who, from lack of moral stamina, had made a hopeless mess of his life before he had lived the half of it. Like so many brain-workers, he chose to do his task by fits and starts, putting on tremendous spurts, neglecting food and rest while the fit lasted, and seeking to stem the succeeding exhaustion with equally reckless bursts of dissipation. Nature took its revenge in moods of deep depression, in acute neuralgic pains and nerve disorders, which, refusing to yield to stimulants, could only be soothed by morphia used in increasingly large doses. A very simple story: no more beaten path than this down the slopes of Avernus.

A smell of hot coffee came up into the

room from the basement. The medical student ran to the door and took the steaming tin pot from the little slavey. Her face was smudged, her hair dishevelled as a haystack, but as she peeped round the door, her plain countenance wore a look of pity and concern that made it all womanly. The young student told me later that but for the kindness of this poor toil-worn human machine, the wretched occupant of the garret must have died long ago.

Sutherland raised Cunningham's head and put the cup to his lips. With a petulant movement he jerked it aside, and the coffee splashed upon his bare throat and chest. He gave a groan.

"Come, man, pull yourself together. Drink this. It will do you good."

The quiet tone of authority reached the drowsy brain. The heavy lids were lifted.

"Who are you?" he asked languidly.

"Never mind that now. I'm here to help you to get well. That's the first thing."

Sutherland has a knack of making himself

obeyed. In another quarter of an hour the patient was safely asleep.

"He very nearly slipped out of our hands," he said, looking down on the unconscious face; "but he'll pull through this time." We were alone by now, the student having had to rush off to a lecture.

"Is it a bad case?"

"As bad as well can be. Look here."

He pulled up the loose shirt-sleeve, and displayed a thin arm pitted all over with little lumps.

"What is it?"

"Hypodermic syringe. They soon learn to use it themselves. By-the-bye, there must be one hidden somewhere about, and though he's safe to sleep for some hours, we may as well find it."

"He's had a fright. He'll never attempt to dose himself again."

"Won't he? That's all you know. When the craving's on a man, the threat of hell itself wouldn't deter the victim of the morphia habit. Man, you don't know—may you never

know—the awful bondage to which a wretched being sells himself when he takes to this. He would barter his soul for an hour's bliss. The poor devil may have had his struggle at the first; who knows, but it was a lost battle from the beginning. He's the last man—with a nervous system no better than a woman's—who should have been cast loose in London. The old minister did him a bad turn when he let him go. He ought to have stayed in the country and hoed turnips."

We searched the room, and found nothing. Sutherland dived deftly under the pillows without disturbing the sleeper.

"He's got it hidden somewhere—under the mattress, perhaps. Well, we'll hope he'll sleep all night, and I'll be round first thing in the morning."

"I'll see he doesn't get it. I'm going to stop here and look after him."

He turned upon me sharply.

"Why?"

"You said yourself he ought to be watched."

"Yes, but you——"

"Well, why not I? I've nothing to do. I'm not here for necessary rest, like you."

"I thought it was you who were the invalid," he said, with a grim smile. "You invited me, if I remember, to attend you medically."

"Take it that I've recovered, then! If I don't look after him, young Flower will—and he can't afford his night's rest. He's a good-hearted young chap, that."

"Upon my word, you force me to think you're a good-hearted chap yourself."

"Nonsense! what have I done? I came here with no other thought than to call on him—take him news from home; and when I found him in this plight I went straight back to fetch you. You've done all the rest."

He looked at me as if he had not listened.

"I suppose this was what you came to London for," he said searchingly; "to look after him—out of friendship for his friends?"

"Out of friendship for his friends," I repeated. He need never know more.

He looked down darkly at the bed; at the

insensate face on the pillow, its beauty marred, its very intellect brutalized by self-indulgence.

"You're a good man, Harry," he said; "but, then, if you had loved the woman who has given her heart to *that*, you might have felt as I do. I'll do my duty by him as a doctor, but I can't serve him as a brother."

There was no need that he should. Susceptible and yielding where women are concerned, he is severe towards the errors of men, perhaps because the ordinary temptations have passed him by. But if he were perfect, would he be half so good a comrade? Besides, a weakling myself, sheltered all my life under his strong friendship, I found it less hard than he to sympathize with another's failure. Had I ever had any hope of winning Nancy Gillespie, it might have been different; but jealousy had no root-hold. She had never known, and would never know, that I loved her.

He gave me some few simple directions and then left me, and in that darkened room, where

there was nothing for a watcher to do but to listen to the heavy breathing of the sleeper, visions of two far-away homes came to me, where love was waiting patient and expectant; well it is for dim-sighted man that a veil intervenes between him and the calamities which he can bear so long as they are hidden. For the first time it was possible to be glad that the old minister was blind.

About nine o'clock the young student came creaking up on tiptoe to invite me to share his supper. The patient, sunk in deep sleep, could be safely left. On our way down we met the young servant lass.

"Look here, Polly, my dear," said my companion, taking the girl by the thin shoulders and shaking her to and fro, "this gentleman is going down to my room for an hour or so. Just you look in on Mr. Cunningham from time to time, and tell us if he stirs or seems uneasy. I know you'll do this for the love of me."

The girl promised, with a blush and a grin for the gay young gentleman, who was good

for a shilling when he had one to spare, and always ready with a cheery word for this poor white slave.

Mr. Flower occupied what is known to landladies as the "first-floor back," a room which is cheaper on account of its limited view over a dingy net-work of backyards, the jungle of the night-prowling cat.

"It's awful good sport potting them," he informed the visitor; in imitation of a wittier wag he read the Riot Act, and, conscience thus appeased, made cheerful war upon the marauders with an air gun.

On one end of the table a coarse cloth was spread, and a frugal meal of bread and cheese set out upon it, flanked by a big jug of beer. Young Flower busied himself for a minute in the depths of a cupboard, while the guest pretended absorption in a grisly little heap of bones, which kept the beer-jug company.

"Human foot," said the student, producing from one paper bag some rosy slices of ham, and from another half a dozen pale-faced tarts, and spinning round in search of a plate; "and

beastly difficult to master too." He swept up the collection and thrust it in his jacket pocket. "I keep them there handy, and go over them when I've an odd minute. Those brutes of examiners trip you up if they can, you see—and they're pretty safe to do it unless you've crammed a lot."

He went on to apologize for the fare; though, guessing how generously he had provided for me, I was half ashamed to eat it. He was a bright young fellow, with the same honest open look I had noticed in the sister, and he was very frank and communicative.

"Mary's a very good sort," he announced, "though she chums with a queer lot. She wants to live with me—we're all the family that's left; but she can't come here, you know. Not the place for a girl. Mrs. Wembly only goes in for men lodgers; saves her bother, I suppose. Cunningham is the only one of us who works at home for the greater part of the day, and I dare say that's why the old woman is rough on him. He was no end of a swell when first I came here. He

had the dining-room floor, and gave supper-parties almost every night."

"Then the lower a man falls, the higher he mounts?"

"Oh," he laughed, "we're all used to ups and downs. I was skied myself for a whole quarter. Mother Wembly is decent enough; she doesn't turn a fellow out till she must."

"Is there a vacant room now he could use? There's no fireplace in that garret, I notice. It must have been freezing in winter, so near the roof."

"Perishing; I don't know how the poor chap got along. I used to coax him down here sometimes; but for weeks past he wouldn't budge. But perhaps he didn't suffer as much as one fancies; I suppose he was living in a sort of dream—half fuddled, don't you know, and didn't take much notice."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Let's see. He had to move up when he lost his post on the *Morning News*. It must have been the end of last session."

"I mean this morphia-taking."

"Oh, a good bit. You see, it's nothing when a man begins, but he's bound to go on increasing the dose. It's an awfully good thing for him you've turned up. There's nobody here to look after him."

"I don't know that he'll agree with you; he may resent my interference."

"Not he. He's pretty well past caring; I suppose"—he tilted his glass, and looked hard at the remains of beer in it—"there's a point at which a fellow loses his sense of shame, when he could let himself down to take that poor slavey's mite of a wage."

There was silence between us. There are feelings one can't put into words. It seemed a long time to both of us before I found myself saying—

"I don't know him, as I told you this afternoon. He never so much as set eyes on me till to-day—never even heard of me; but there's an old man at home—his father—who charged me to look after him. I was commissioned by him to settle any little matter

that might be owing. There's the landlady—there was no difficulty in getting her to present her bill, of course."

"Mother Wembly hasn't what you might call much diffidence in her composition," he said, with an awkward laugh.

"But it wasn't to be expected she should know of his other creditors, and I suppose one mustn't be hopeful about getting any exact statement from himself? Most men are unveracious on the subject of their liabilities; but I count on you to tell me all you can."

He was young and ingenuous, and I knew by the way he wriggled on his chair that my little ruse had succeeded; his slender purse, too, had been laid under contribution.

He was reluctant to make any claim, but gave in when it was pointed out to him that I was the mere agent for another. I trust the recording angel will blot that small fabrication from my record when he makes up my account.

Without this young fellow's cordial help it would have been difficult for me to play my

self-allotted part; but he had an audacious smiling way that made him the spoilt child of the house. The landlady was indeed not sorry to be relieved of nursing an undesirable tenant: but who else, save the first-floor back, could have coaxed her to sacrifice her best mattress on my behalf, or wrung from her an extra pair of blankets? With this impromptu shake-down I was like to do very well; but Flower insisted on bringing me his travelling-rug as well, pointing out how liberal a draught the ill-fitting door admitted. He would have shared my watch too, had I been willing, or halved it had he had his own way, and he left me urging me to call him should I experience any difficulty with the patient.

"I'm afraid I'm an awfully sound sleeper," he said, with apology, "so it wouldn't be any good to ask you to thump on the floor; but if you'll just tear down and empty the water-jug over me I'm pretty certain to waken."

Such severe measures seemed unnecessary, for indeed the early part of the night passed quietly enough. Cunningham, sunk in heavy

unconsciousness, was so silent that more than once I rose to bend over him and listen if he still breathed. For me there was no such thing as sleep; the day's discovery had moved me too profoundly. There were moments in that black night when the house and the quiet street without, eerily still after the bustle of the day, lifted thought into greater vividness — moments of assailing temptation when I fiercely longed that Nancy Gillespie should stand by the sleeper's bed, and see with her own eyes the abyss to which the man of her choice had fallen. Surely love must have perished in the shock?

But who dare set limits to a woman's tenderness, and was it for me to grudge him his last chance of redemption? Lost as he seemed to be, her hand might yet pluck him back from the deeps, set him on his feet, make a responsible human being of him; if it were willed that she should give her youth, her life, for this, she would hold it well spent. But to me, in those endless, crawling hours, it seemed monstrous, horrible, a shameful waste that

she should bestow on him so much as one pure thought—spend on him a single sigh or tear.

A calmer judgment came with the breaking dawn, as if there were evil spirits abroad who fled the eye of day.

A sleepless night may make a misanthrope of any man, but I had no more time for brooding.

There was no means of excluding the light from the miserable room, for there was neither blind nor curtain. As it fell on the sleeper's face, he stirred uneasily and presently awoke. Never shall I forget the hours that followed. With the full return of consciousness, Cunningham was seized with a terrible restlessness, the effects of the morphia had worn off and the awful craving for more had returned in full force. He suffered, as I believe, the torments of the rack as he lay there shattered, palpitating, writhing; the change upon him was more marked in the morning light; the sensitive mouth was coarsened, the delicacy of the features blunted,

he had the look of an old wizened man as he lay shaking and palsied, a mere bundle of shattered nerves.

There was no one yet astir in the house. I dared not leave him even to seek the help of the medical student; alone I struggled with him as with an unnatural strength he fought for his liberty, or, sinking back exhausted, would curse and rave, or weep like a child as he entreated me to have mercy on him. He was long past caring that a stranger should intrude upon him; perhaps I was but part of the baleful waking nightmare in which those hours were passed, when, for one reason or another, he was denied the drug. He asked no questions; wonder and curiosity were both dead, numbed as was every other natural feeling. Whatever had been bright and engaging in him—and surely there had been much once—what of zest and delight he had experienced in the exercise of imagination and fancy, all was lost, swept away, as it seemed, beyond recovery. Glimpses of the black purgatory in which he was plunged,

horror of the burden he was condemned to bear, chased every feeling but compassion from one's mind. Who would not pity sins so bitterly punished?

No longer could I wish for Nancy Gillespie's presence; any one who called her friend could but pray that she might remain in happy ignorance of his fall.

With what leaden feet the morning crawled. I was weary almost past usefulness when at last I heard Sutherland's buoyant step on the stair.

He came into the room talking.

"What slug-a-beds you are here!" he cried. "I've been prowling round for an hour or more, and at last effected an entrance with the connivance of the milkman. Well, how is he now?"

His own question was answered as he approached the bed by another wild attempt on Cunningham's part to escape.

"Steady," he said, puting out a strong hand, and thrusting Cunningham back among the pillows. "You don't want to get up

yet, man. There's nobody awake but the sparrows."

Cunningham flung incoherent words at him with lips that were almost too parched for speech. The old raving, the old craving: phrases that were burned on my brain.

"All right," said Sutherland, quietly; "one minute and you shall have some. I knew you would want it, so I brought it with me."

I looked on horror-stricken while he took from its case a little hypodermic syringe already charged, and sought for a space among the punctured wounds to make the injection. Had I dared I would have stayed his hand. Perhaps he guessed this, for as he drew the needle out he looked up with a little nod and a smile.

"You look a bit of a wreck, Harry," he said. "Night watches don't agree with you, that's clear; but you won't have any more trouble for a while. This will settle him."

Even as he spoke, the anguish died out of Cunningham's face, and a dull, lethargic peace stole over it.

We watched in silence a moment or two, then Sutherland put his arm in mine and drew me from the room.

"Come home and wash and eat and sleep," he said, "that precious scamp won't know you've left him."

"But, Sutherland," I said, resisting, "to give him more of that poison, after last night——"

He smiled, amused.

"I know what I'm about. You can't stop the morphia all at once, the only way is to lessen the dose gradually. If I refused to give it him, he'd get it somehow or go mad for want of it; your victim of the morphia habit has the cunning of the devil. Did you find out where he keeps his supply?"

"No, I didn't make any further search."

"You had your hands full, old man! I thought he would have slept longer. Well, he's all right in the mean time—back in his paradise, poor wretch; but we must cut off the source, or we can't help him at all. Somebody has brought it in, for he hasn't been

out for weeks. Landlady bribable, do you suppose?"

"I shouldn't think so. She seems to dislike him."

"Any servant, then, who would do his bidding?"

"There's only that slip of a girl you saw yesterday," I said, turning hot and avoiding his eye, as I remembered young Flower's admission of the night before.

"It ought to be a punishable offence to sell deadly drugs to any but a medical man direct," he said, "and not to him without his signature. Of course some fool has given him a prescription. I dare say he's had it made up by every chemist in the neighbourhood."

To describe the days that followed would be but a repetition of what has already been told. Sutherland insisted on my giving up the night watch, and when I flatly refused, he promptly engaged a nurse for that duty.

"I could do it myself," he said; "but, for one thing, I owe it to my own patients to make the most of this holiday, and for another,

there's a better chance of his obeying me if I stick to the doctoring. 'Sir Oracle' daren't make himself too cheap."

The lodging was but ten minutes' walk from our own quarters, and I still spent all my days there. Mrs. Wembly had been induced to give up a less comfortless room on the second floor, and we got the patient into it without much difficulty. He was utterly run down, and having for months had no appetite, was nearly starved. It almost seemed as if his constitution had received too severe a shock for recovery. To sit by him and record his varying moods was scarce a joy; he was by turns gloomy, fractious, self-pitying, self-abasing—a sorry spectacle. He was incapable of effort or of interest either in his work or in his friends. Me he regarded incuriously, taking my presence for granted, as he took all the details of his life.

Once, when of set purpose I mentioned Shawbridge, he looked up with a gleam of intelligence. But he was too sunk in apathy to ask any questions; Sutherland was now

daily lessening the dose of morphia, and missing its stimulation, he was going through all the tortures of depression that make the uphill road one long martyrdom. Truly, for those who escape it is a saving as by fire.

Twice, in spite of all our vigilance, he succeeded in dosing himself, and the whole weary, horrible battle had to be begun over again. Once he made a futile attempt at suicide. Sutherland was pitilessly stern with him.

"You're too much of a coward to kill yourself outright," he said; "you haven't even pluck enough to put yourself out of a world which is the worse for such as you, but you're mean enough and small enough to give as much trouble to others as you can. If there's any spark of decent feeling left in you, let it have some chance. Is it nothing to you that you're breaking two of the best and kindest hearts that ever beat? Haven't you a thought for the old man at home, who has been more than a father to you, or—or of the girl you presumed to love? Do you think it's any pleasure for my friend Fowler here to spend

his holiday waiting on your whims, and listening to your whimperings and wailings? If it weren't to save some who care for you far more than you deserve, from a pang or two, let me tell you neither he nor I would spend a thought upon your worthless body. You are pleased to think of us as tyrants when we restrain you for your good, and to frighten us you play at taking your life, thinking to scare us by the sight of blood; but you're careful that it's only a harmless little vein you open. If you truly want to die, I will tell you a quicker road to take than that. Go on as you've been doing; baffle us by taking that poison you've been clever enough to conceal, and no doctor in London will be able to save you."

The poor wretch lay white and stricken under this terrible reproof, and for one afternoon the watcher had an easy task, and almost dared to hope that the beginning of better things was at hand. But not so easily are the chains of old habit broken and the prisoner set free. To his shame, be it

spoken, there were days and seasons when his self-appointed guardian was fain to fling the burden from him, and let the victim go his own way to destruction; it was only the vision of a woman's sorrowful eyes, the thought of a woman's pleading prayers for trespasses beyond her dreaming, but not beyond Heaven's pardon that kept him at his post.

Sutherland's visits — he calm, practical, cheerful, except when roused to rare anger— were a source of strength, and the young medical student was a capital comrade. Once or twice I saw his sister; good feeling towards this bright young pair was an easy thing, and we promised ourselves some rare days together when the patient could be safely left.

Perhaps the hardest part of all was the sending of news to the Manse. They had to be told there that Frank was ill, and yet not too much made of the matter to arouse their alarm. Looking back, I can scarce say now whether the answers that came to me were greatest pain or pleasure. Rarely, they

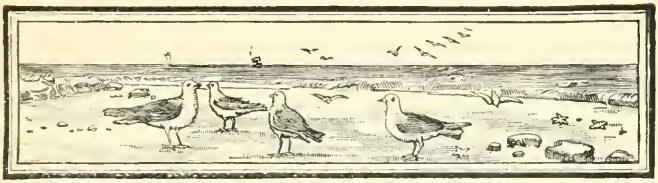
were in the blind minister's uncertain scrawl; oftenest dictated, but never without some word from Nancy Gillespie herself. To read these hopeful, grateful sentences in the light of my knowledge gave me many a stab, but I hold myself absolved, the end for once justifying the means, and if any take that to be Jesuitical doctrine, let him but imagine himself in the same dilemma.

Sutherland asked no questions about this correspondence, which was conducted with perfect openness, the letters directed to our lodgings.

Once when I invited him to look at a letter in writing which he could not but recognize, he pushed it gently aside. Perhaps he was wise, for what could it be but pain to him to read her words of lively hope and gratitude? It was something else that he craved from her.

I heard little of how he passed his time, seeing nothing of him except at Cunningham's bedside. I knew that he had sought out Mrs. Tom Carnegie and saw her sometimes. From something he let fall, I gathered, too, that he

was a good deal at Pont Street, where doubtless Lady Uniacke found a use for him. But he was well able to look after and amuse himself, and I concerned myself little with his doings. I was living in a world apart, all thought and energy bent to one end.



CHAPTER XVII.

IT was a red-letter day when we got him on to the sofa, hired from the second-hand shop round the corner—a capacious ancient Chesterfield, its shabby leather hidden with a gay cretonne. The bolster and the pillow from the bed supported him; and a flowered chintz dressing-gown, the property of the dining-room, and borrowed from him by the friendly young medico, gave a touch of colour to our patient's ghastliness.

He took little interest himself in our proceedings, and grumbled when we carried him over to the couch, nor could he for a long time be made to smile at young Flower's little quips and jokes. To see the transformation in this young gentleman's face when Suther-

land punctiliously discussed the case with him —not a muscle of Sutherland's face ever moved, be sure—was an edifying spectacle; such airs of empressment, a bedside manner that the oldest specialist might envy. But he threw off his gravity in the patient's room, and laughed and sang and told little tales, horrible or comic, of his hospital experiences, till even poor Cunningham's melancholy was a little shaken.

"You wouldn't believe what a jolly fellow he was once," he said to me, when Cunningham had fallen asleep. "You've never heard him sing?"

"He looks very little like singing now."

"He can warble, though. I don't suppose his voice is trained; but he's one of the chaps that can do things by instinct, without any teaching. And a good sort too; would do you a good-natured turn if he could. Why, when I was down on my luck he—he spoke to Mrs. Wembly for me. He was in her good graces then, you see; the dining-room always is, so long as he can pay up."

The young fellow spoke generously, and there was no mention of those "temporary loans," with which he had repaid this small favour; those little borrowings had all been repaid, and Mrs. Wembly was in so charitable a frame, that of her own accord she sent up a cutlet and a milk pudding for the invalid's dinner. She, too, had a word of praise for the "pleasant gentleman" Mr. Cunningham had been before he took to evil courses, and mounted to the garret and forgot to pay his bills.

He was Don Doloroso now, and anything but a cheerful comrade; but either he had fallen among an extraordinarily charitable set of people, or there must have been something winning and taking about him after all, which only his fatal indulgence had obscured. Prosperity suits most tempers, and his first years in London had been full of promise, and of fulfilment too. He had steady work, and with diligence and punctuality might have risen rapidly. Whether that door was now closed to him remained to be seen, but there

are few professions where one's place cannot be quickly and easily filled. One must be a genius indeed to be missed.

Miss Flower called that morning, as she sometimes did, to see her brother, or leave a message for him, deputing me to deliver it when he was out.

The dining-room floor — to quote Mrs. Wembly—I never chanced to meet the occupant—was good-natured enough to let his room be used for visitors in his absence, and there I found Miss Flower. She had a basket of primroses in her hand.

"Tom out?" she said. "I was afraid I'd miss him. Would you mind telling him I've got press tickets for the Savoy to-night? He's to come round and fetch me. I know I oughtn't to tempt him; but he does work pretty hard—or, at any rate, *I* do."

"I'm sure of that."

"You mean Tom doesn't?"

"Not more than is good for his health. He's got that to study, you know."

She laughed a little.

"Well, he'll have to study other people's all his life, after this, and that *will* be hard work. Did you ever see Tom feel a pulse or take a temperature, Mr. Fowler? He used to practise on me when I let him. If I hadn't been compelled to laugh, I'd have fancied myself dying of some mysterious complaint. Oh, what humbugs we all are!"

"What imposition are you practising on your public now?"

"Oh, nothing very dreadful this week. I've got to cram up the law of master and servant. Can you tell me of a trustworthy hand-book? and prophesy on the sleeve for summer; that's easy, you know; puffs will be bigger than ever; and there's the usual woman who wants to be told where to go for a holiday—there *are* a good many idiots in the world."

"And what bit of the habitable globe do you reserve for them?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter in the least; because they never by any chance adopt one's recommendation. All their energy is exhausted in putting the question. If one felt one was

going to be taken in earnest it would be a serious matter."

"For the fools!"

"Oh, no doubt," she laughed; "but I was thinking it would be a pretty bad business for me."

"Don't say that, because I came down specially to consult you."

She opened her eyes with mock seriousness.

"You weren't thinking of dyeing your hair, were you, or taking a wife!"

"The two things seem to have some co-relation in your mind—is the one generally a preliminary to the other? When I fall in love, I'll come and describe all my symptoms; perhaps I'll even screw my courage to the point of writing to the editress of 'Teacup Talk,' and asking to be put up to the latest fashions in proposals. They change like the sleeves, don't they?"

"An editor can't know everything," she said demurely; "but I dare say I could read the subject up—in the British Museum. But I think you said there was something else?"

"Which only needs a woman's quick intuition to answer. That poor chap upstairs——"

"Tom said he was better," she broke in.

"Yes; we've got him out of bed. That's a step, of course; but it hasn't roused him as we hoped. He's dull and spiritless, and seems to have no energy or interest for anything. It won't do to let him go on moping."

"Why not take him for a drive?" she suggested eagerly. "It's not a bit cold, and the air is as balmy as April. He can sit up, I suppose?"

"I suspect he can do more than he tries to do; but that's the trouble of convalescence. The mind and will don't get back their tone as fast as the body."

"But you think he'll recover?" she said, a little sadly. "It would seem such a waste if he didn't. In our little world, the world of people where brains must supply the body's needs, there are many whose cleverness is just a sort of veneer—serviceable enough so long as you don't put it to too severe a test; but he had ability that went right through. Mr.

Davidson once said he'd be a formidable rival if one weren't so certain he would cut his own throat."

"That was very characteristic of Davidson."

"Ah, but you've saved him from self-destruction," she said hopefully. "He never had anybody to make allowance for him before. Others"—she spoke with evasive hesitation; but perhaps she had Davidson in her mind—"only gloated over him when he went wrong, because it justified their prophecies."

"Well, we must prove that your better opinion of him is justified too. You would advise that his regeneration begins with a drive?"

"Of course I don't know what is best for him; but surely the spring air, and the sight of the budding trees, and the feeling that the world is beginning all over afresh, must be good for everybody. It seems as if one were having the offer of new chances, and being invited to put the past behind one."

"He might realize all that more if you were there to point it out."

She shook her head.

"I can't afford the luxury of a holiday to-day," she said; "it's dissipation enough to be going to the theatre to-night. Perhaps, by-and-by, when he has been out a few times, we might all go together. Will you take these primroses to his room? They came from the heart of a Buckinghamshire wood. Perhaps as a token that spring is really here, they'll beguile him out. And you'll please tell Tom that if he isn't punctual, I'll give his ticket to some one else!"

But it was one thing to suggest a drive, and another to persuade Cunningham to adventure himself once more among the moving crowds. He refused petulantly to make the attempt, and turned an ungracious shoulder on the basket of blossoms. His appetite and his strength were in some measure returning, but his spring of interest in life seemed sapped at the roots. He watched us furtively, as one or the other sat by him; and under the surface blur of wretchedness there peeped the acute cunning that would outwit us if it could.

In the afternoon, when he was lying quiet, I was once more summoned to see visitors in the dining-room. Mrs. Wembly, knocking cautiously, beckoned me to an interview on the landing, never guessing, honest woman, with what a leap she set my pulses bounding when she told me that two ladies, one of whom desired her to say that she came from Shawbridge, wished to see me. For me there was but one lady in Shawbridge, yet rather had I never seen her more than face her now. Then I remembered that only that morning she had written, and my courage came back to me. She was straightforward, single-eyed in all her ways. Had it been her purpose to come to town, she would have said so.

Since I need not fear her presence, I cared little whom I might meet; but in all my guesses I had never lit on little Miss Sophia Green. Yet there she sat, in the worn easy-chair, looking very smart and rather frightened, and both pleased and shy. She introduced her companion, an elderly, stout, and florid lady, of an amiable aspect, as Mrs.

Black, a relative whom she was visiting, and explained, with a little rush of words, that she had heard from Shawbridge how ill Mr. Cunningham was, and how she had wished to come at once and ask for him, but did not know where he was living. She turned to the lady, who nodded assent. She was large, and very asthmatical, and sat bolt upright, labouring for breath.

"Miss Gillespie could have told you," I began.

"Yes," she hesitated, colouring up hotly.

"Miss Green thought it better to ask Mrs. Laidlaw," said her companion, who had now recovered from the exertion of walking up the steps, and spoke with husky readiness. "I'm told you live in Shawbridge, so I dare say you've heard of her. Her husband and mine were related."

"I have heard of Mrs. Laidlaw," I said, looking at Miss Sophia, and expecting her to share my amusement; but she was buttoning and unbuttoning one of her gloves with nervous fingers, her head bent.

"She's as good as the town-crier for news," the visitor continued, with a good-natured smile; "and we knew she would be able to tell us, if any one could, where poor Frank was hiding."

"But he isn't hiding," said Miss Sophia, speaking with an effort at ease.

"No, he isn't hiding," I said, impatient of this petty attempt at mystery. "You could have heard of his progress at the Free Church Manse—at either of the Manses for that matter—any day, and perhaps a more accurate account than even Mrs. Laidlaw could furnish you with.'

Miss Sophia was annoyed, I could see, at my persistence, but too shy to express her displeasure in words. The old lady nodded at me humorously.

"Shawbridge folks are wiser than to give her the go-by," she said; "they know that they would pay pretty dear for information if they went to any other quarter for it; but, deary me, what does it matter where we got the address, since here we are, and

that poor lad no further off than the room over us! I suppose it wouldn't be possible for us to cheer him up with a little visit?"

Miss Sophia's little boot was tapping the carpet; she bit her lip when I said that visitors were quite out of the question yet.

"Well, now, that's a pity; not that I'm very good at climbing stairs, but I'd manage to hirple up if it would give him any pleasure. You see, Mr. Fowler, when Frank first came to London, my husband bade him look on our house as his home; Scotch folk cling to each other in the South, and there was the Shawbridge connection as well; and no son could be more welcome than he when he came out and in; and what made him change all at once I'm sure I don't know. But I do know that it was a real grief to both Mr. Black and me. Why, you remember the very last time you were with us, Sophia, my dear, what fine times you had together?"

"I don't think that can interest Mr. Fowler," said the girl, distantly.

"Indeed, but it does," I assured her; "and it explains many things, too."

Mrs. Black laughed wheezily.

"Ah, I dare say it does," she assented, as if she shared some amusing secret with me; "and perhaps when you tell Frank that the love and welcome are waiting, unchanged, for him, and that his young friend is ready and eager to share his convalescence, you will be able to persuade him to come back to us. We live at Finchley, a very fair imitation of the country, and I am sure the fresh air would be good for him."

"This is the second time to-day country air has been prescribed for him," I said, watching the red signals mount on Miss Sophia's cheek. "There was a young lady here this morning—an old acquaintance of his"—she looked at me furtively—"who proposed that he should take carriage exercise."

"Perhaps she proposed to take it with him!" Miss Sophia tossed her head.

"I hope she will," I made answer, not

unwilling to punish her. What did she mean by this parade of a secret understanding with Frank Cunningham — this affectation of a special interest in him and his concerns? If it was done out of girlish vanity, to impose on her kindly relative, then it was ill done, and deserved no sort of support from me.

Mrs. Black lingered a little to ask some questions as to the course of his illness, and to urge me to use my authority to induce him to go to Finchley.

I assured her that my influence counted for very little; but that possibly Dr. Sutherland, as his adviser, might be more successful. No, he was not living here, but he came daily; he should certainly be told of Mrs. Black's kind offer.

She let me help her out of the chair, with a smiling apology for her clumsiness, and escort her to her carriage, where a footman was waiting to propel her up the sloping gangway. Miss Sophia came behind; and while the invalid's cushions and footstools

were being adjusted, she said to me, low and hurriedly—

"I didn't think you could be so unkind." Then—before I found an appropriate rejoinder—"Who is that girl---that girl who wants to go out with him?"

"Mr. Cunningham has a good many acquaintances," I said; "but there is only one lady, so far as I know, to whom he has given the right to question his actions."

The trouble in her eyes quenched their anger. She looked as if the tears were not far off.

"Perhaps — you don't know everything. You may be mistaken."

"No; but I think I do know where he ought to go when he's stronger—and that isn't to Finchley."

"Does he take his orders from you?" she said; but her attempt at flippancy was a piteous failure.

"Certainly not. I shouldn't dream of interfering with his decisions."

I couldn't help smiling grimly to myself

as I thought how futile any such attempt on my part would be. Cunningham had accepted my presence, unquestioningly, while too ill to care upon whom the task of nursing devolved; but I had neither sought nor received the right to question him about his private affairs.

There was time for no more of this unsatisfactory talk, for Mrs. Black announcing herself as "settled," Miss Sophia got into the carriage, contenting herself with a little nod of farewell, from her seat on the other side of her large companion. Mrs. Black was more effusive, and entrusted me with a large basket of garden and hot-house produce, which she good-naturedly hoped I would share with the invalid. But I was in no mood for more of his company at the moment, and sent the offering up to him by the hand of the landlady, while I went out to taste the air, and shake off the unpleasant impression the interview had left.

Looked at from any point of view, Cunningham was thoroughly unsatisfactory; if, as one

could but suppose, he was engaged in a flirtation—to call it by no harsher name—with one girl, while betrothed to another, he was even more of a scamp than I had supposed him to be. It rendered the record against him scarce blacker to guess that he had Miss Sophia's fortune in view. That he had succeeded in inspiring her with confidence, the poor little fool took no pains to conceal. I recalled the incident of the letter, and many of her guarded hints read in this new light became clear. But it was not possible to think of her as consciously and willingly Nancy's rival. She was too good a girl for that. It was easier to suppose she had been led to believe that Nancy had ceased to have any claims upon this fickle lover.

Men of his order are the scourge of the world, the more because—inexplicable mystery—they always win the love of the best women. That they do not always keep it scarcely helps, since they are seldom found out till after marriage. Why women—whose instincts are so unerring as regards their own sex—so often

make a disastrous choice when they bestow their hearts is one of the things a mere man will never understand. But every day you see the manly man mated to the fool, while he who is physically and morally a weakling carries off the highest prize.

Here were ever so many feminine hearts beating kindly for young Cunningham. Had not Nancy Gillespie given him the treasure of her faithful love? And now little Miss Sophia must needs cry for him; while the servant wench in his lodgings worshipped the very ground he trod on, and gave of her poor wages to keep him in life, and even the sensible young editress of "Tea-cup Talk" brought him primroses, and took a sisterly interest in his welfare. A sad waste of tenderness it would seem to most men, in whose eyes Master Frank would figure only as a sorry young scamp, who had found principles rather cumbersome luggage, and preferred to travel free.

I went round to our rooms, but Sutherland was not there. It seemed to me he was very little there now, though when I had suggested

that he should run over to Paris, as we had planned, he refused. He said that he could amuse himself well enough in London, and would not go without me; but he did not urge me to join him.

Perhaps, if he had been very eager, I might have yielded. There was nothing to keep me in town except the possible chance of holding Cunningham up from sliding back into the abyss. It was the only thing I could do for the one woman whom I would have given my life to please, and it was a pity to leave it half done. But Cunningham was convalescent now, and every day would bring some addition to his strength, and one could not always play the part of prop.

I had not seen Sutherland that day, and wondered where he was; one or two dainty notes stuck in the frame of the mirror over the mantelpiece gave the clue to some of his movements. The season he despised was as yet some weeks distant, but there is always a certain section of society in town, and he had been drawn in for various little festivities.

One of the notes, which he had redirected to me, was from Mrs. Tom Carnegie, asking us both to dinner on the following evening. For a moment I was strongly tempted to accept it; to leave my patient to his own devices; to fall back into the mud if he chose.

But, if one is wise, one thinks twice before acting on an impulse. I scribbled a message, bidding Sutherland make my excuses to Mrs. Tom, and went back to Cunningham's rooms.

END OF VOL. I.

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